

THE JAMES BOYS WEEKLY.

Containing Stories of Adventure.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York Post Office, by Frank Tousey.

No. 12.

NEW YORK, MARCH 15, 1901.

Price 5 Cents.

THE JAMES BOYS TRICKED:

OR A DETECTIVE'S CUNNING GAME.

BY D.W. STEVENS.



"If you don't hand over that bag in five seconds, you will be a dead man, just as sure as there is a heaven above us!" These words were emphasized by the muzzle of a revolver being thrust into the window on a line with the face of the cashier.

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CHAPTER I.

OUT.

Tramp, tramp, tramp.

The heavy tread of feet upon a floor of iron. The heavy clank of a chain sometimes softened or modulated by a pitiful sigh. It is a disagreeable scene. All around are bare black walls, cold and bleak, and the sharp November winds whistling through the upper part of the building render the jail more drear and disagreeable.

Yes, reader, it is a prison to which we invite you, and we can assure you there is nothing to be found within its walls save misery.

"You can't come in here, madam. You can't be admitted just yet," said the man who was on duty at the outside door.

"Why?" asked a soft female voice.

"The jailer is not here."

"Oh, dear. And I so much wanted to see some one."

"But this not the day to receive visitors at this jail."

"Oh, what am I to do—he's sick."

"What? Do you mean the bank and train robber, Jesse W. James?"

"Y-yes," the woman answered, sobbing behind the thick, dark veil she wore.

"What is he to you?"

"A very dear friend and relative."

The speaker was a woman, rather tall, slender and graceful, but she was so closely veiled that her face could not be seen at all.

"Who are you?"

"I refuse to give my name."

"But we must know who we are admitting before we let any one go in the jail."

"What is it to you?"

"A great deal."

"Search me if you want to, but show my face I will not."

The jailer shrugged his shoulder and with a smile answered:

"Well, I guess, miss or madam—whichever you are—you cannot enter."

"When will Mr. Knott be back?"

"Well, we are expecting him right soon."

"Very well; I'll wait."

"'Twon't do you any good."

"Yes, it will. I'll see, anyway," and she seated herself in a chair near the big stove, which was glowing with a generous heat. Then a silence fell upon the scene, broken only by the tick, tick, ticking of the great octagonally-shaped clock. The slender, graceful personage who was sitting before the stove was silent and motionless as if she had been carved out of stone.

The guard said nothing to her, but sat in gloomy silence and bowed his head over a copy of a paper which he was reading. At last a step was heard on the pavement without.

Some one was coming.

She hoped it was Mr. Knott, and with wildly beating heart said to herself:

"Oh, if I should fail this time, if I should fail all will be ruined. I must—must not fail."

Then some one entered.

"I wonder if it is Mr. Knott, the jailer?"

The guard, having become absorbed in his newspaper, was oblivious of the presence of the woman or the approach of his employer.

"Are you Mr. Knott?" she asked, rising as the man entered the office.

"Yes."

"That gal wants to see Jesse James," the guard now put in, and next moment plunged into the paper he was reading.

"Do you?" asked the jailer, fixing his eyes on her.

"Yes, sir."

"Who are you?"

"She refuses to tell her name or show her face," drawled the guard from his paper.

"Well, miss, or madam, whichever you are, you must understand that we are very particular as to who we admit to see Jesse James."

"But you can have me searched."

"I know, but we must know whom to hold accountable for any mistake or escape or anything."

The veiled lady was silent for a moment, and then coolly said:

"I will have to play my last card."

"What do you mean?" asked the jailer.

"You force me to do that which I would rather not have done. But I will gain admittance to that jail."

"You will?"

"Yes."

"Are you real sure you will?"

"I am—I know it—and——"

"Well, let us see you."

She held a bit of folded paper before her to him, and he took it, his eyes opening wide with astonishment.

As he read the note he became still more astounded, and, finally crushing the paper in his hands, gazed at her in silent wonder.

"What do you say now?" she asked.

"That man's authority I cannot, I dare not deny."

"Then you mean that I can go in?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"At once."

She was not asked her name, nor asked to unveil herself, but escorted to the door, where the guard, still absorbed in his paper, was sitting.

"Ben, admit her."

"To see Jesse?"

"Yes, it's all right."

"D'ye know who she is?" asked Ben.

"I told you it was all right, and that is enough," answered Mr. Knott.

The guard grunted, pulled open the door, and admitted the veiled lady. She went straight in the jail to the cell where Jesse James was and waited for Mr. Knott to come.

The heavy clank, clank, clank of chains on the floor could be heard, as some one in irons paced the narrow cell.

"I will open the door for you, lady, and let you in the cell," said Mr. Knott.

"Thank you."

Thrusting a key in the lock, the jailer turned the bolt and called:

"Jesse!"

"Yes, sir," and there was a rattling of chains as if some monster animal was rising to its feet.

"Here's a visitor, Jesse."

"Who?"

"I don't know. She's a lady, who won't either show her face or give her name."

The strange woman entered the cell, merely bowing to the jailer and saying:

"Thank you, sir."

Mr. Knott closed the door, and locking it, went away, saying:

"When you want me, call."

"We will," answered Jesse's strange visitor.

"Amazement sat enthroned on the brow of Jesse James as he gazed at the veiled woman. He sank down upon one of the rude benches and gazing in wonder at her, asked:

"Who are you?"

"Can't you guess?"

"N—no."

The veiled lady had been standing with her back against the door.

"I am your friend."

"My friend?"

"Yes."

"Why did you come here?"

She gave a cautious look about to assure herself that no one was listening, and then whispered:

"To give you your liberty."

"Can you do it?"

"Yes."

"Hold—I have heard that voice before and I should know you."

"Perhaps you do."

With one sweep of her hand she tore away the veil from her face, also the dress she wore, and stood before him a woman no longer, but a slender, graceful man, attired in black velvet, top boots and wearing a black mask over his face. Jesse James started back and cried:

"Ike—the mysterious Ike!"

That singular being called Ike, but known by no other name, had long been a mystery to Jesse James and the other members of their

band. He had never yet shown his face to any one of them, as he always appeared masked. His name was unknown, for he never gave any other name save Ike, and was known by no other. That he was a friend of the banditti was proven on a hundred occasions. Jesse James first met him. He was hard pressed, his horse exhausted and his pursuers, led on by Timberlake, the invincible sheriff, were pressing him close, and his horse ready to drop, when there suddenly came out on the plain, seeming to rise up out of the earth, a singular being leading a fresh horse. He wore a mask over his face, and at any other time would have fallen under Jesse's pistols. But just at this moment Jesse's weapons chanced to be empty, and the outlaw thought himself lost.

"Here is a fresh horse for you," he said. "Take him and ride for your life."

"Who are you?" Jesse asked.

"Your friend."

"What is your name?"

"Ike."

"Ike who—what other name?"

"Just Ike."

And thus the strange masked friend had been christened by the James Boys and their desperate followers as the Mysterious Ike. Ike had appeared on a score of occasions since, always when they were sorely pressed, and had saved their lives again and again.

But at last Carl Greene, one of Pinkerton's shrewdest detectives, aided by a woman, had captured the James Boys and locked them up in jail, for which he had received the enormous reward of twenty thousand dollars. Ike seemed to have suddenly disappeared from the face of the earth, and Jesse and Frank James began to despair of ever seeing him again.

But here he was, suddenly appearing as unexpected as if he had come out of the earth.

"Ike, oh, Ike!" began Jesse James.

"Whist—not so loud."

"Oh, my dear fellow, you cannot understand how glad I am to see you."

"I assure you I am equally as glad to meet you."

"Your presence here means our release. I know it, Ike, I know it."

He went to the door and looked out through the iron grating and then came back to Jesse's side.

"Let's sit down."

They both sat down on the cot.

"It is a close place, Jesse."

"But you can help us, Ike. You have some strange, supernatural power," said Jesse James.

"I have no supernatural power," Ike answered. "Yet I will help you. All a bold, energetic man determined to succeed can do, I will do. I can promise no more."

"And you will succeed."

"Yes; I know what I can do, and I will do it."

"Will you?"

"Yes. Where is Frank?"

"Frank is in an adjoining cell."

Again Ike looked to see they were not seen, and from under the wig of hair which he wore on his head drew out some tiny yet powerful tools. There was a small saw, a cold chisel, a file and hammer, with a considerable amount of loose hemp-cords, which were to be used in muffling the hammer and to destroy the sound of the blows.

It was wonderful the amount of things which were crowded into that wig.

"Jesse, can you put these in your boot leg?"

"Yes," he answered. "I ought to be able to put those in my boot, if you could put them all in your hair."

He quickly put the tools away, and then Ike drew a vial of colorless liquid from his pocket.

"What is that?" Jesse asked.

"A powerful acid. This is a discovery of my own. Ten drops of this on the largest bar of iron in your cell would make it so soft you could saw through it with ease in three minutes."

"Can we?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll cut through to Frank's cell."

"Not until night."

"No, not until night."

"Now, Jesse, you have long been noted for your discretion."

"I believe so."

"You have, and I want you to be discreet to-night, if you ever were discreet in your life."

"I give you my word that I will be discreet."

"Then we shall succeed. There is not a shadow of a doubt of our success. Cut your way through the iron walls to Frank James, and then both of you break through this door, go to the rear hall, and there is a narrow window nine feet from the floor. Well, it's got iron bars across it, but you can dispense with them."

"Oh, yes."

"Now I have stayed long enough. You have the tools, and you can do the work."

"But when we get out?"

"Drop to the ground—it's only twelve feet."

"Yes; but—there is a twelve-foot wall around the jail yard."

"At midnight you will find a rope thrown over the wall, hanging down on the inside. It will be all right. Hush! here comes the jailer, Mr. Knott."

Tramp, tramp came foot-soles on the iron floor, and the next moment Mr. Knott, looking in, said:

"Well, woman, are you ready to go?"

"Yes."

Ike had taken the precaution to don his disguise, and wore the heavy thick veil over his face, so that the jailer would not see that it was covered with a mask.

"I am," he answered.

"Come on, madam."

With an assumed sob, the pretended woman shook Jesse's hand and went away.

"Is he your brother?" asked the jailer, as they walked out.

"No," the veiled woman sobbed.

"Not a brother?"

"No."

"Some relative?"

"No."

"Oho, I have it now, a lover?"

"Oh, hush! I feel so bad."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Well, my dear, let me tell you your lover, Jesse James, will hang."

"Oh, will he?"

"Yes, unless I save him."

"You save him—can you?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Why, I'm the jailer, and I have but to bid him go, and he goes."

"Could you?"

"Yes."

"Would you?"

"Well, now, that depends."

"On what?"

"You must be a very pretty woman, and by your voice I know you are young."

"I am."

"You are pretty."

"How do you know?"

"I feel assured of it, and I want to kiss you."

"Oh, hush!"

"I do."

"And will you be good to them?"

"Frank and Jesse?"

"Yes."

"I will."

"And will you be very good to them?"

"Yes."

"They are so lonesome, so tired. Will you take off those chains to-night and let them both stay in the same cell?"

"Well, I don't know."

"I won't kiss you a single time if you don't, and besides, I'll tell Mrs. Knott all about it."

"Oh, don't—don't do that!"

"I will. I will ask Jesse, when I come to-morrow, if you have been good to him, and I—well, I'll govern myself accordingly."

Ike had a feminine voice, and was a woman in size and build, so he could easily pass for one.

He went away from the jail elated with success and full of hope that the James Boys would soon be at liberty. Ike was an excellent judge of human nature and had not miscalculated his man.

Jesse and Frank were both amazed that evening to have their irons removed from them, and both were put in one cell.

"Jesse, what does this mean? I don't understand."

"I do."

"What?"

"It's Ike's work. He is a wonder."

"Ike?"

"Yes, Ike. He was here."

"Ike here—in jail?"

"He was; he's gone now."

"When?"

"Two hours ago."

"How did he get away?"

"Walked away. He was no prisoner. He came on a visit."

"He did? Then you have at last got an opportunity to see him to see his face?"

"I have not."

"Why? He wasn't masked."

"Yes."

"How did he pass the guard masked? The mask alone would rouse the guard's suspicion."

Jesse then explained that the mysterious Ike had come with a veil over his face, disguised as a woman, and had left implements for them to cut their way out.

"Well, Ike is a wonderful fellow," said Frank James. "I feel now that our fortune has taken a turn and that we will soon be free."

"Yes, be patient," Jesse answered.

He was patient. The brothers sat for a long time, either silent or consulting in whispers. At last night came on and the hours passed away.

They could hear fellow convicts in adjoining cells sleeping—sleeping the sleep of forgetfulness, if not of innocence.

Jesse and Frank James silently waited until the hour of midnight came, and then with eager, trembling haste produced the tools which were to set them at liberty.

"Handle 'em carefully, Jess," said Frank; "for if you were to break a saw or file, we would be ruined."

"I know it."

Though both had the most implicit confidence in Ike, they still had a fear that some break or mis-slip might cause a delay, or even ruin their prospects of escape.

Jesse and Frank were both cautious as they were bold.

They gazed on the exceedingly small tools, and to them it seemed impossible that they could get out by the use of them.

Jesse drew out the vial, and going to the door, dropped some of the liquid on one of the cross-bars. He waited a moment and then pinched the iron with his finger nail. To his surprise, the iron was soft as rotten wood. Taking the small saw, he cut the bar through in three minutes without making enough noise to awake the man in the adjoining cell.

Next he dropped some on the steel rod inside, and taking the three-cornered file, he quickly severed the rod.

"It works well," Jesse whispered.

"Yes. Can you open the door now?"

"No, there is one more bolt holding the lock, and when we have it open I think we can make it."

Then Jesse dropped the drops of acid on the steel bolt and waited a few moments for the wonderful effect to follow. The powerful chemical began at once to work, and Jesse taking the saw soon cut the bolt in twain.

They then tried the door.

A screw still held it.

"This is provoking," said Jesse. But a few drops on the screw, and he crumbled it between his finger and thumb. But still the door was held.

Anybody else would have been in despair, but Jesse was not.

He made a careful inspection, and discovered a secret bolt encased in a galvanized iron tube.

Would his acid have any effect on the galvanized iron?

They tried it.

But it did not.

The galvanized iron was only a thin sheet though, and Jesse cut it away with the file in a few moments. Then he poured some acid on the fine steel bolt. The finer the steel the more readily and successfully the acid worked.

Jesse took his saw and quickly cut the bolt in twain. The door moved, and by pulling it a little this way and that, he finally got the piece of the bolt out, and the door swung open.

They passed out of the cell and paused in the hall of the jail.

"Well, Frank, Jack Sheppard could not have done it more nicely, could he?"

"I think not."

"Now, there is that window, it's our only hope."

"Yes, and it's ten feet from the floor."

"We are tall."

"But not tall enough to reach that."

"We'll double on it, Frank."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you remember how we used to play circus?"

"Yes."

"We can play it again. Stand up against the wall and let me mount on your shoulders."

"All right."

Frank took his place up by the wall and Jesse sprang upon his shoulders. He reached to the window with ease and proceeded to carefully anoint each bar above and below. There were six of them, and he was not long in completing the work. Then he sawed them through, one by one, and threw the bars into the yard.

They fell upon the grass and made no noise.

The window was clear, and Jesse pushed his feet through, and when his body was half out and half in, he reached down and seized Frank by the hands and pulled him up to the window, where leaving him holding by his hands, Jesse dropped down upon the ground and waited for his brother.

Frank followed quickly.

The clock in the distant church steeple at this moment chimed the hour of twelve.

The James Boys went to the wall and felt along it until they came to the end of a rope, which they rapidly climbed. The wall was surmounted with long, sharp spikes, but Jesse, by the aid of his tools, cut off some three or four of them, and then scaled the wall and dropped on the other side.

"Out!" whispered Jesse.

"Out," echoed Frank, landing at his side.

Jesse and Frank had landed in an alley. They went through it and upon the street and from thence into the suburbs, hurrying away toward two blasted oaks, whither Ike had directed them to come.

As they drew near they saw two horses with saddles on them. Both horses were dark, sleek and glossy, and Jesse soon recognized one as his famous Siroc. The other was Frank's Jim Malone, and both were splendid steeds that could not be beaten for speed and endurance.

"Where is Ike?" asked Frank.

"I know not," Jesse answered. "We have our horses and we need not care now where he is nor who may follow us. Mount."

They both sprang in the saddle. Then Jesse cried:

"Out!"

Away they flew, defying pursuit.

CHAPTER II.

OLD COTTONSOX.

"Who be I? He, he, he! W'y I thort everybody knowed me."

"Well, I confess I don't."

"Yer don't?"

"No."

"Wall, now do tell."

"What is your name?"

"Old Cottonsox."

"Cottonsox. Well, sir, I must say that that's an odd one, even for this Western country, and I'm hard put to tell whether ye've got out o' some lunatic asylum or jail."

"Jail, he he! Out o' jail, ha, ha, ha! I never wor near a jail, no, not I."

"Well, Cottonsox, d'ye irrigate?"

"Irrigate—wot yer givin' me that hog wash fur? Speak plain United States an' don't be givin' me yer slang, cully."

"D'yer drink?"

"Drink?"

"Yes."

"Now, will a fish swim? Lem me give yer a p'inter. Ef yer want to know whether I'll guzzle, just try me."

"Ha, ha, ha! Lew, yer in for it!" roared a dozen voices.

"Come right up, Old Cottonsox, and have something."

The scene is in a Western Missouri barroom, about three weeks after the events narrated in our last chapter. Lew Hutchinson, a wit and bully who had recently moved from Laplata, in the northern part of the State.

The oddest, queerest creature in all the world was the very ragamuffin calling himself Cottonsox.

"See here, you slinger of pizen," cried Lew to the bartender, "give us somethin' stingin' hot, for unless I'm very much out o' my mind, this tater-demolition's holler plumb down to his boots."

"He, he, he, Redsnot, bet yer not!"

"Me not?"

"Yes, yer not."

"Why?"

"Ye've been er-fillin' up all mornin', an' every time yer step I kin jist heer the whiskey swash."

A roar of laughter came from the dozen loafers gathered about the pair. Lew, the wit, the bully, had met his match.

"Ho, ho, ho! Lew, he's got yer!" cried one.

"Well, old Cottonsox, we'll try an' remove that air achin' void in yer own heart. Come an' fill up, won't yer?"

"Guess a pig comes to corn."

"Now, Dave," cried out Lew in his loud, swaggering manner to the bartender, "give us some o' yer whiskey wot's got the snakes strained out o' it."

"All right."

"Leave all the fightin' in it, though."

"Count on me fur that," and the brawny bartender winked.

The whiskey was poured out, and Old Cottonsox, looking greedily at his, asked:

"Can't yer gin me a leetle water, mistur?"

"Of course."

Dave filled a glass with water and Old Cottonsox slyly emptied his liquor on the floor, when all eyes were away, and filling the glass with water, drank it down.

"Wot, by jingo, he's downed all of her."

"Have you?"

"Yes."

"Ye'll be drunk."

"No, I won't."

"Ye'll be a-whoopin' around here, wantin' to chaw somebody's ear," put in Lew Hutchinson, "and ef ye git yer fightin' harness on don't slight me, Old Cottonsox. Ah, ef yer love me, hit me a kind uv a love tap with a club, fur I've been a-pinin' fur a leetle bit av amusement, yer know."

"Don't go ter gittin' riled, stranger," growled Old Cottonsox meekly. "I'm not goin' tew hurt ye."

"Not er goin' ter hurt me. Oh, for the love of heaven, don't say that, cos I kin bear ermost anything, but fur some un ter be a'talkin' soft like ter me. I want er hurt. I never wor hurt, an' I'd like ter know jist how it feels. Whoop!" cried Lew, as the effects of his fiery potation became more and more effective. "I want to fight! Oh, knock me down—knock me down! I'm a ragin', roarin' cyclone, and when I blow the forests tremble!"

The little old fellow called Cottonsox stood leaning against the counter, his arms folded across his breast and a sort of idiotic smile on his face. His slender figure and tattered garments, with his white, old slouch hat, might have made him an object of sympathy in a locality where sympathy was indulged.

"I'm a mountain eater!" roared Lew. "I chawed cobble-stones! I drank the Mississippi dry, kicked over Pike's Peak and picked my teeth with the butt cut off a shell bark hickory. Who wants ter fight? Whoop! Ef yer love me, somebody hit me right squar' in the face!"

"Say, Mistur——"

"Wall, what, Cottonsox?"

"Wot's the matter with ye? Did that last drink kinder go to yer head?"

"No, it went to my fist. I want ter fight."

"Sho! You can't fight."

"Can't fight?" shrieked Lew, wild with frenzy.

"No, yer can't fight!"

"Wot, do my ears deceive me? Air this the fantastic imagination o' too much tanglefoot, or war it the gentle zephyr bearin' a lie from some far off shore, or war it a fact that Dave's whiskey ain't got all the snakes strained out o' it, after all?"

"'Twarn't neither," replied Cottonsox. "It war jist me a-tellin' yer right ter yer teeth ye can't fight."

"You?"

"Yes, me."

"And did yer say that? Oh, ef yer want ter aid a sufferin' mortal wot's laborin' under a painful hallucination, speak them words agin, and say 'em slow like, that I may kinder drink in the music ov yer voice."

"I say ye can't fight!"

"Stranger, ye've took a load off my breast—I'm blamed if ye haven't. I thort maybe after all Dave war mistaken about havin' the snakes strained out of his whiskey an' I had 'em agin, but I guess it's all right. Now, I love ye so I'm ergoin' to give yer one o' the wust whalin's yer ever had in yer life!"

"Look here, bully, I want ter ax yer suthin'," put in Cottonsox.

"Ax it quick, afore I make a pancake out'n you!"

"Hev yer got yer will made?"

"No."

"Ye'd better."

"Why?"

"Last time I fit a bull and I broke his neck."

"Wall, I'm ergoin' ter fight a jackass an' he kin look out fur his neck. Squar' yerself and git off them rags, fur cuss me ef I ain't ergoin' ter let yer hev a landin' across the street."

"Don't need ter take 'em off."

"Yer don't?"

"Are yer ready?"

"Yes."

"I'm ercomin'; now yer got ter go down."

"Come on."

"Look out: Mount Pizgah couldn't stand this!"

"Nur a healthy mule couldn't kick like I'm ergoin' ter hit."

"I'm a-comin'."

"Come on."

"Whoop—here I am!"

With a wild yell, Lew sprang toward the apparently unconcerned Cottonsox and struck a blow that might have felled an ox, had it struck where aimed, but with an agility that would have done credit to a trained athlete, Cottonsox suddenly slipped aside and the blow was wasted on the air.

Then he bounded forward, and by a blow at the side of the head of Hutchinson, just below his ear, laid him out on the floor.

"Wall, b'gosh, that's neatly done," exclaimed an old fellow who, more than half seas over, stood gazing in admiration on the daring feat performed by the little old fellow called Cottonsox.

Slowly and carefully the giant bully, Lew Hutchinson, struggled to his feet, and gazing about, rubbed his head.

"What's the matter, Lew?" asked one.

"Got er love tap?" put in another.

"More like the kick uv a healthy mule," added a third.

Dazed and confused as he was, Lew soon recognized Old Cottonsox, and with a bow of much politeness, said:

"Excuse me, won't yer, mistur? My foot slipped that time an' I fell, but I assure ye it won't happen agin. I'm er comin' agin', an' I'll give ye all the amusement yer want."

With a yell he sprang at the little old fellow who had been the author of his fall and struck at him with both fists.

Either blow would have knocked Cottonsox into the middle of next week, but he dodged them both, and then, like a battering ram, his hand flew straight to its mark, and down went Lew Hutchinson with a blow between the eyes from a fist that was hard as iron.

Lew was done for.

He was carried into another room and laid on a cot, and when he recovered his eyes were both swollen almost shut.

He had no further inclination to fight, and his antagonist became again the silly, idiotic, chattering fellow he had seemed before.

He had no boast to make of what he had done, and stood with gaping mouth and eyes on the floor. At this moment there was a clattering of horses' hoofs on the ground outside, and two horsemen came galloping up to the saloon and dismounted.

Both were young men, with a Western swagger, wearing broad-brimmed hats and pistols at their belts.

"Hello, who's yon?" asked one of the loafers in the saloon.

"Dun know," another answered. "They're a-comin' in."

They came in, and, striding up to the bar, called for a gin cocktail.

"What's the matter here?" asked the largest of the two, turning his cold, steel-gray eyes about over the crowd assembled in the saloon.

"Been havin' a leetle scrap," said one.

"Well, one would think so. From the noise we heard a quarter of a mile away, I'd say a regiment of mules had been kicking."

"Guess Lew thinks so, too."

"Why?"

"Oh, he's laid out in t'other room, both eyes swelled shut."

"Who did it?"

"Him."

The man answering the interrogatory pointed at Old Cottonsox.

An incredulous smile stole over the face of the stranger as he gazed at the small man who had been accused of delivering such love taps. He slowly drained his gin cocktail and went over to where the champion sat on a bench, and taking a seat at his side, said:

"Who are you?"

"Cottonsox."

"What's your other name?"

"Old."

"Old? What are you givin' me?"

"Straight goods."

"What's your full name—all of your name?"

"Old Cottonsox."

"Well, that's an odd name."

"What's yourn?"

"Henry Jackson."

"That's an odd name."

"You're a liar!"

"Why?"

"Your name is not Cottonsox."

"You're a liar, it is, and I might say with an ekal amount o' sartinty thot you warn't Henry Jackson. Yes, siree, I'm Old Cottonsox."

"You're a fool."

"Now, look here, stranger, thar's no need o' yer wastin' yer breath on that air kind o' hog wash, fur I kin go around this town and find a dozen men who'd say the same thing. Don't yer flatter yerself that that's original, 'cos I've heerd it afore."

"I've no doubt you have."

"Well, now, stranger, don't yer go to gittin' flurried, 'cos you and I might get along swimmin'ly if we'd only a mind to."

"Why don't you give your real name?"

"Why don't you give yours?"

The man calling himself Jackson started to his feet and gazed at Old Cottonsox in amazement and consternation.

"How dare you say I don't go by my right name?"

Old Cottonsox started to his feet, and gazing at Jackson in amazement, said:

"How dare you say I'm not Cottonsox?"

"I've nothing to say about it." Jackson returned, walking hurriedly to the other side of the saloon.

"Sit down here," his companion whispered.

They both sat at a table.

"Well, Jess, are we suspected?" asked the man who had invited the fellow calling himself Jackson to sit.

"No."

"Who is he?"

"Who?"

"The fellow you were talking to."

"He calls himself Cottonsox."

"Cottonsox?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's not his name, Jess."

"No, Frank. I think he is either an astute thief or a fellow who has escaped from some lunatic asylum."

"Shall we drink again?"

"No, the liquor here is vile stuff, and a little of it would unseat our reason."

The two newcomers were Frank and Jesse James, who, aided by the mysterious Ike, had escaped, as we saw in our last chapter.

They had come to the town, where they were little known, disguised so that they might pick up such information as would be of value.

"Next week," Jesse whispered to Frank, "is the fair at Kansas City. Then we will open the eyes of the people with a vengeance."

A tall man, with a long mustache and the air of a sport, came over to the James Boys and said:

"Are you goin' to Kansas City?"

"Yes."

"To the fair?"

"Yes."

"Got any stock?"

"Don't know whether we'll enter or not."

"Got stock?"

"Yes."

"What kind?"

"Thoroughbreds."

"Hev ye?"

"Yes."

"Do they run?"

"They do."

"Good! Enter 'em an' put 'em on the turf so we can see 'em run."

"We'll see about it. How far is it to Kansas City?"

"Twenty miles."

"Let's be goin', John," said Jesse, carelessly, rising to go.

"Won't ye have somethin' to drink before you go?" asked the sport.

"Yes."

They drank and went out to mount.

A ragged-looking tramp of a fellow stood gazing at Siroc.

"I say, mister, that's a good hoss."

"What are you doing here?" asked Jesse.

"Lookin' at yer hoss."

"You had better mind your own business."

"Now I say, mister, I kin go all around this town and find a dozen men wot'd say the same thing. Don't think that's original, because I've heerd that afore."

Jesse and Frank leaped in their saddles and galloped away, leaving Old Cottonsox standing gazing after them with a silly, idiotic grin on his face.

CHAPTER III.

A LIVELY SCENE ON THE TURF.

"Walk up, gentlemen: walk right up and see the great, original and only one ideal monster. Now, here we are. All of you gather around and I'll sell you paper, pencils, envelopes and stationery cheaper than ever before. Here you are. Would you see the wild kangaroo?"

The speaker was a large, red-faced man, with red whiskers and a sloping forehead.

It was a busy day in Kansas City. The great fair was in progress, and thousands and tens of thousands of people were assembled in the new Chicago of the West. There were old men, young men, middle-aged men and women and children in constant crowds and streams, roaming in and out at the gate near which the auctioneer had established himself with his goods to vend to the highest bidder.

"Walk up, everybody; walk up, and don't stand back. Do you want to see the wild kangaroo and the prettiest sight in the world? If you do, I can show them to you."

"I do; where is it?"

"Here is the prettiest handkerchief in the world for the money, and," pointing at a big boy who stood gaping at the scene, "there is the wild kangaroo."

This produced shouts and yells on the part of the crowd and made the boy furious.

"Say, mistur," called out a tattered, ragged fellow from the crowd, "there hain't nothin' original about that. Now I kin go around this town and find a dozen men that'll say the same thing."

"Well, who are you, anyway?"

"Old Cottonsox."

"Let me sell you a pair of silk stockings."

"No, I'm not a silk; I'm a Fillyite."

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from nowhere."

"Where are you goin'?"

"Same place."

"What do you do?"

"Nothin'."

"Got a fortune?"

"Not a cent."

"How do you live?"

"On wittles and drink."

"How do you get them?"

"Buy 'em."

"Get out—you must think I'm a fool!"

"Wall, sir, I kin go around this town and find a dozen men wot'll say the same thing."

"Get out!"

"Git out! W'y, sir, I haven't got in yit."

"Leave, I tell you."

"I'm goin' 'round ter look at the sights an' see the hosses," said Cottonsox, going off. "I didn't come to see jackasses, so I guess I don't keer ter look at ye any longer."

The itinerant vender of an innumerable number of useful articles now turned about and began addressing his crowd as if he was not in the least annoyed by the remarks of the eccentric individual. The boy, at whose expense he had got the laugh, was so delighted that he shouted:

"Guess I'd lots rather be a kangaroo nur a jackass."

"You have the compliment of being both!" shouted the discomfited auctioneer.

To change the subject he began to sell articles, knocking off at extravagantly low prices, and people became excited and began to buy.

"Wall, that air is wot I calls a good hoss," said Cottonsox, stopping in front of the entering stand where Jesse and Frank James, disguised, were entering their famous horses, Siroc and Jim Malone.

"Who are you?" asked Jesse.

"Old Cottonsox."

"Get out of here."

"Why?"

"You haven't sense enough to remain in respectable company."

"Wall, now, that's not original."

"Begone."

"Say, mister, I wants ter ax a favor o' you."

"Of me?" Jesse opened his eyes in wonder.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"Lend me a quarter."

"What for?"

"I want ter go in ter see the races."

"I won't do it."

"I ain't got no money."

"I don't care if you haven't."

"Not a cent."

"Go and work for your money."

"Do you work for your'n?"

"It's none of your business how I get money."

"Ah, don't be hard on a poor feller. My! I'll go in an' ride yer horses."

"I don't want you to ride our horses."

"In the race?"

Jesse raised his whip to strike the old fellow, when Old Cottonsox said:

"Don't yer be too harsh, mistur. I onct knowed a feller what was too harsh an' wanted ter lick me, an' yer can't guess where he is now."

"Where?" asked Jesse. "Dead?"

"No—wuss 'n that."

"In the hospital."

"No, wuss still—"

"In the penitentiary."

"Wall, now, stranger, that's purty bad. It's bad ernuff, but he's wuss off 'n that."

"Where is he, then?"

"He's teachin' school."

"Get out, you fool."

"No, I'll go all around this town and I'll find a dozen men as 'll say the same thing."

Jesse turned to Frank and said:

"Now everything is ready. Let us go in and pay no more attention to this fool."

They entered and went to the place where racers were kept.

"Jess?"

"What, Frank?"

"D'yer reckon we are suspected?"

"No."

"I don't know why, I feel kind a nervous."

"Do you?"

"I do."

"Well, you are always nervous. There is no sense in one being as nervous as you are, and all for nothing, too."

"But, Jess, suppose we should put a jockey on the backs of our horses to ride the race, and he'd run off with him?"

"Well, if he would, we'd have to kill the jockey. But no jockey could get out past us, could he?"

"The people might stand in with him. They might know we were the James Boys."

"Oh, very well. If they know that we would then have to cut our way through. But they don't. And now, Frank."

"What?"

"We are going to make a bolder stroke than we ever made."

"We are?"

"You bet. The boys are all here."

"Are they all?"

"Yes; Jim, Cole Younger, Dick Little, and all."

"And what?"

"We're goin' to lift the treasury."

"What?"

"Hush, fool! Now don't go to be frightened out of your boots, for we are not going to let you get hurt. We are going to rob the fair. They'll take in between twenty and thirty thousand dollars."

"Oh, Jess, that's too much."

"No, it's not."

The races came off about an hour later, and those seven bold, desperate-looking men, all with broad-brimmed, white hats on their heads, and whom no one suspected of being the great Missouri banditti, were none other than the James Boys and their followers.

Jesse was still shouting at Siroc carrying off the prize, when some one touched his arm, and a voice at his side said:

"I say, mister, that air hoss is a blamed good hoss!"

Jesse James started as if he had been struck a blow, and there at his side stood the very man whom he had come to hate and dread—Cottonsox.

"What! you here?" he roared.

"Oh, yes."

"How did you get in?"

"Walked in."

"Did the gatekeeper pass you?"

"No, I had er ticket."

"Where did you get it?"

"Bought it."

"How?"

"With er half er dollar. But I want to tell yer that air hoss air a blamed good 'un—d'yer know it?"

"Yes."

"How much'll yer take fur him?"

"More than you'll ever be able to pay."

"How much did yer giv' fur him?"

"That's none of your business. Now, look here, you are not half such a fool as you look."

"Yes, I've heard that afore. Law, that's not original."

"Well, do you go away?"

"No; I want to see the races."

"Over yonder is a place where you can see as well as you can here and not annoy me."

"Great guns! I ain't a-gnawin' ye, am I? Ain't had nothin' ter gnaw on all day nuther."

"Well, I am going. I don't want to be bothered by you any more. If I am, I want you to understand that you will be in trouble."

"La! How?"

"Come here."

Jesse led the half idiotic fellow aside under a booth, and, drawing out a pistol, said:

"D'ye see this?"

"Yes."

"It's loaded, and I'm going to kill you with it, if you don't keep out of my sight."

"Ah, ha," and he ran away at a shambling gait, as if he was completely frightened out of his wits.

Smiling, Jesse turned away and went back to the side of his brother.

"Frank, we must get our stikes and be ready, for the hour to strike has almost come," he said.

"Jim has gone to receive the stakes."

"Very good. Now secure the horses as soon as possible, and the sooner the better."

Jesse was not nervous. The hour for a dangerous enterprise was at hand, and he always on such occasions urged in every way possible upon his men the necessity of promptness.

"We must be prompt," he would say. "We must act on time and in concert or we will fail."

Never, perhaps, in the world's history did ever a band act so completely in concert as the James Boys.

Half an hour later Jesse stood by Siroc watching the groom who was rubbing him down, and conning o'er in his mind a wild and desperate plan soon to be consummated, when a voice near at hand broke on his ear:

"Say, mistur, why can't yer let me do that. I guess I need er quarter ez bad ez any un, don't I?"

Jesse turned about and cried:

"You here again?"

"No, I ain't."

"Yes, you are."

"Ain't never been here afore, and I couldn't be here again, could I?"

"Look here, sir, you are just a little bit too sharp, do you know it?"

"Wall, now I kin go around this town and find a dozen men that'll say the same thing."

"Get out!"

"Eh?"

"You want to get out."

"Beg parding, mister, yer mistaken; I want er git in."

"Leave me; you understand what I mean."

The idiotic fellow turned about, and crying in an excited manner, "Ah, ha!" hurried away through the crowd.

"Do you know that fellow?" Jesse asked the colored groom who was rubbing down his horse.

"Yes, sah; I have seen him."

"How long has he been about Kansas City?"

"Oh, he's been heah in town about two or three weeks, I reckon. He's kinder crazy."

"Why don't they send him to the asylum or lock him up?"

"Oh, massa, he don't do nobody any harm at all. De Kansas City Times had a piece in it the other day, wantin' to know why they didn't lock him up, and then the Globe it said it warn't necessary, an' I reckon it ain't."

"Well, if the fool don't quit hanging about me I will hurt him."

"Ah, no, massa, there ain't no harm in him," said the negro. "He's just a silly kind of a fellow, what likes hosses too well, that's all."

"Maybe that accounts for his hanging around us," said Jesse, turning his eyes admiringly upon Siroc.

"That's it, boss, that's it, and by ginger, I don't blame him, for ef that ain't the best hoss that walks I don't know nothin' about a hoss. Now, I hearn 'em tell an awful sight about Siroc and Jim Malone, dem hosses of the James Boys. Why, I don't believe they can compare wid these hosses, do you?"

"Certainly not," Jesse answered.

While Jesse and his band are getting ready for a feat that in daring and dash has never had an equal, quite a different scene is being enacted in an apartment in a small house near the gate of the great fair ground of Kansas City.

A young woman, very beautiful but sad, sits by the window, wringing her hands in agony of grief and rage. She is dressed in widow's weeds, which strongly contrast with her almost snow-white face.

"Oh, vengeance, vengeance—will it ever be mine!" she sobbed, continuing to wring her hands. "Poor Henry! my poor murdered husband. Can you sleep in your grave when your murder is un-avenged? But you shall be avenged. Oh, Henry, you shall be avenged. I see you even now with your golden locks all dabbled in blood, your eyes closed to gaze no more on me forever, and then I registered a vow to Heaven to kill your slayer, and I will never cease until he is dead."

Then, growing more calm, she rose and paced the apartment back and forth, back and forth again and again, her white, slender fingers working convulsively as she struggled with her emotions.

"Why don't he come? He was to come and tell me whether the slayer of my husband was in the city or not. Ah, what is that I hear? Footsteps approach—perhaps 'tis he."

She waited with bated breath and eyes wide distended.

Her pretty face was distorted with anxiety.

A few moments only of suspense and then there came a rap at her door.

"Come in."

It opened and a man entered. She recognized him and, turning toward him in an eager, excited manner, asked:

"Is he here, oh, is he here?"

"Calm yourself, Mrs. Caloway. Why all this nervous excitement?"

"Oh, tell me, is he here?"

"Will you please be seated?"

She sank in a chair and turned her sweet face in pitying appeal up to him, but she said nothing.

"Mrs. Caloway, before I brought you hither, you gave me your promise that you would be prudent."

"I am prudent," she answered. "I have kept my apartment; nor have I for a moment quitted it. Now I'm still willing to obey you, but the blood of poor Henry cries out from the ground to me for vengeance."

"Bide your time and all will be well."

"Is he—is the murderer in town?"

"Yes."

She gave a slight start.

"Have you seen him?"

"I have."

"And talked with him?"

"Yes."

"But you never slew him. That's right—leave that to me. I must see that the work is done and well done."

"You shall have a chance."

"Remember that we will trust no more to the slow process of the law. We did once. According to law you and I arrested the James Boys and locked them up in prison, but the law is slow—justice is tardy—and they were given an opportunity to break jail and did so."

"Well, we'll take care that they don't do so again," said the gentleman, his fine, classical brows knit in a manner indicating the deepest thought.

Then both became silent and thoughtful. They were a gloomy pair, and there was that about them that was terrible. It is a desperate opinion for one to arrive at, that the law is not sufficient, that it fails to protect the helpless and innocent. They who pay taxes and support the State expect protection from the State, and when they fail to get it they are apt to complain. A strong political influence in Missouri was charged with shielding Frank and Jesse James because they had served in the Confederate Army.

Here was a beautiful young widow, whose husband had been ruthlessly slain by Jesse James, and people had told her that if either Frank or Jesse were captured alive they would be treated as heroes, and by some hook or crook in the law they would be released. This prophecy was afterward literally fulfilled in the case of Frank James. The evidence against him was sufficiently conclusive to have hung any ordinary criminal. He, the black, soul-stained murderer, was acquitted and is now held in the highest esteem by some of the politicians in Missouri.

At the time that Nora Caloway was lamenting her wrongs and the sad death of her husband a very exciting incident was happening near the gate.

It was nearly four o'clock in the afternoon, and the cashier of the Kansas City Fair was making up the receipts of the day preparatory to transferring them to the bank. There were several thousand dollars in the bag, for it included not only the gate money but the entrance fees as well.

A man came leisurely along and looked in at the office window. The window being open, he put his head in and said:

"How do you do?"

"Pretty well, sir," answered the astonished cashier, wondering at the fellow's impudence.

"You've got a pretty good pile."

"We have done fairly well," the cashier answered.

"Now, suppose I was Jesse James," continued the impudent stranger, "and I should ask you to hand over that money, what would you do?"

"I can't say, sir, what I would do until I have been tried."

"All right. I'll try you now."

"What do you mean?"

"I am Jesse James. Now hand over that money or I will blow your head off."

"You?"

"Yes, me."

"Get away. You are just a-joking."

"If you don't hand over that package in five seconds you will be a dead man just as sure as there is a Heaven above us."

His words were strongly emphasized by the muzzle of a deadly revolver being thrust into the window and brought on a line with the face of the cashier.

"Great heaven!" gasped the cashier, seizing the package of money, amounting to between nine and ten thousand dollars, and hesitating to deliver it to the robber or fly.

"Halt! Hand that over or you are a dead man!"

The deep, stentorian voice sounded like the knell of doom, and the cashier could only obey.

"We've had a lively time on the turf to-day," said Jesse coolly.

"Siroc carried away the chief prize and his master now has the balance. Not such a bad day's work after all. So, adieu, sir—farewell."

CHAPTER IV.

A DESPERATE FLIGHT.

The astounded cashier next moment heard the thunder of horses' feet.

Running to the window, he saw the robber mounted on a large, black horse, the bag of money on the pommel of his saddle, galloping away.

There were a number of horsemen riding about in almost every direction, and the bewildered man saw among others a mounted policeman.

Here was his hope.

"Help, help, help—robbers, thieves!" he shouted to the officer.

The policeman galloped to the window and asked:

"What's the matter, sir; why are you raising such a racket?"

"We are robbed?"

"Robbed?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"Jesse James has just robbed us."

"Where is he?"

"There he goes on that big, black horse, and he carries at least ten thousand dollars in that bag."

The policeman waited to hear no more, but sounding his whistle, called some of his companions about him and began to inaugurate a pursuit.

It chanced at this moment that Timberlake came on the scene and demanded to know the cause of the excitement, which was explained to him by the horrified cashier, who wound up with:

"Oh, get my money, get my money back for me."

"What! Jesse James, the dare devil, enter right in my town and rob our fair! I will make him rue this. Come on!"

Jesse had, in the meanwhile, got considerable start.

"Jess, Jess!" cried Frank, joining him.

"Come on, Frank."

"Have you got it, Jesse?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"About ten thousand dollars."

"A good haul."

"If we can get off with it; but you must bear in mind we are not out of danger yet."

"Oh, no."

"Where are the other boys?"

"I don't know—scattered everywhere."

Jesse was debating in his mind whether to sound his signal call and bring them together, when a voice suddenly rang out on the air. There was something terribly familiar in the voice, and glancing upward at the house they were passing, he saw the white face of Nora Caloway, the young woman whose husband he had shot a few months before while robbing a train.

Henry Caloway, at the time of his death, was a brakeman on the train, and Jesse got into an altercation with an old man who refused to be quietly robbed.

Caloway interfered for the old man, and Jesse shot him down. The bandit king of America had of late had great cause to dread the newly made widow, and now the sight of her pale face at the window almost froze the blood in his heart.

Not her face appeared alone, but an instant later the bright, polished barrel of a pistol.

"There he goes! There goes the murderer of poor Henry."

"Look out, Jess—look out, the tigress is going to shoot."

Jesse dropped forward in the saddle.

Crack!

Sharp and keen the report rang out on the air, and the bandit king of America felt a twinge of pain in his left shoulder.

"Oh!"

"Are you hit, Jess?" cried Frank.

"Yes."

"Bad hurt?"

"No—it's only a scratch. But the jade shoots wickedly."

Crack!

Whiz!

A bullet came singing through the air and with a thud buried itself in the horn of his saddle.

"Did that hit you?"

"No, the bullet is in the horn of my saddle."

"She may shoot Siroc."

"By George, it would be like the she devil she is, and then I could be at their mercy."

"You would. There comes a party of mounted police."

"And Timberlake at their head."

"Who is that runs out of the house and now mounts a horse?"

"Carl Greene, Pinkerton's detective, as I live? He was with her."

Crack!

A third shot came from the window in which the woman had appeared, and the whiz of a bullet sung out on the air.

It struck the crown of Jesse's hat and passed completely through it.

Jesse turned to Frank and said:

"She can't hit us now."

"Why?"

"We'll be beyond her reach soon, and we are already beyond any accurate aim."

"That's so; but she shoots wicked, Jesse."

"Yes."

Jesse turned in his saddle and gazed impudently at their pursuers, a dozen in number.

Raising himself high in his stirrups, he waved his hat in the air and shouted:

"Come on, an' we'll lead you a lively chase."

"They are well mounted, Jess."

"I know it; but what can the best mounts in the world do against Siroc and Jim Malone?"

"Nothing."

"We can laugh at them."

"Do you see that?"

A little white puff of smoke curled up from the band of pursuers, shutting one of them entirely out from view, and the next moment the heavy report of a gun and the whiz of a leaden ball was heard on the air.

"That was heavy for a pistol," said Frank.

"It wasn't."

"Was it a gun?"

"It was a carbine."

"Then they've got us at a disadvantage."

"We'll see."

Down the hill they thundered, galloping away on the Independence road.

Jesse, fearing that others might have carbines, determined to put their horses to the top of their speed and distance their pursuers, so as to get beyond range even of carbines.

"Frank!"

"Yes."

"We'll put them to their best."

"All right."

Then each tightened the rein and gave utterance to sharp yells.

Siroc and Jim Malone sprang forward like arrows from a bow, and the earth seemed to be rolling away beneath their feet. The fences looked like fleeting shadows.

Away and away! On—on and on along the level stretch of road which leads through the wood between Kansas City and Independence they flew like fiery meteors.

The farmer, going homeward from the fair, heard rumbling thunder behind him, and turning aside, swore he only saw two black streaks run by.

One fellow was unable to get his wagon out of the way, and was amazed when a steed bearing a rider leaped over his wagon as he lay broadside to the road, unable to get out of the way.

Away they flew.

The hue and cry behind increased, and the crowd of pursuers was swelled every moment.

High-way-men! high-way-men!" shouted the voices of the pursuers.

"Stop them! Head them off!"

One man, far in advance of the fugitives, heard the cry.

He was a stout young farmer and the bully of his township. He was jogging leisurely along, his head bowed, and he was giving little attention to which which course his horse took.

He had taken enough liquor to make him reckless, and when the shout came to his ears:

"Stop 'em! stop 'em! Twenty thousand dollars reward!" he suddenly conceived the idea of doing so.

"By gar! don't see why I can't make that air twenty thousand dollars reward just as well as not," he said.

He wheeled his horse across the road and saw two horsemen coming flying toward him.

"Out of the way! out of the way!" roared Jesse.

"Not much, my honey."

"Then take the consequences."

He did.

Siroc struck his horse, throwing the animal over, and the butt of Jesse James' pistol almost cracked the thick skull of the young farmer, and left him lying insensible and almost dead at the roadside.

All this was done without for an instant slackening their speed.

The James Boys thundered on.

Again the hue and cry in their rear rang out on the air.

"Stop them! stop them! Highwaymen! highwaymen!"

No one dared interfere with them. They ran upon several farmers going home, but not one was bold enough to make any attempt to stop them.

But now the toll gate to the bridge is in sight.

Timberlake, who leads the pursuit with the detective, Carl Greene, at his side, sees the toll gate, and in it reads their only hope of capturing the James Boys.

"We have them. we have them!" he shouts.

"Hurrah!"

"Hurrah!"

"Hurrah!"

The wild cheering, as well as the thunder of hoofs rouses the stupid old toll gate keeper from his nap, and he starts to his feet.

"Stop! Where are ye goin' so fast?" he yelled.

"Down with the gate—stop them—reward!" came the distant shout from their rear.

"It be two young blades wot's been a-doin' somethin' and got the coppers after 'em," thought the toll gate keeper.

He pulled a cord, and down came the gate.

"Fool!" roared Jesse.

But neither horseman slackened his speed, but right on like thundering avalanches they came, and their horses at tremendous bounds cleared the toll gate.

As Siroc reared over the toll gate gracefully as a bird, and while he was yet in the air, Jesse James yelled:

"Fool, I'll teach you to close gates!"

Crack!

Crack!

Two sharp, quick reports rang out on the air, almost at the same instant.

The toll gate keeper gave utterance to a yell of rage and pain and clapped his hands upon his cheeks, each of which had been severely burnt by a pistol ball.

"Jess."

"What, Frank?"

"Did you kill him?"

"No. I just put a mark on each cheek, so I will know him again if we should meet."

"You should have sent one through his neck."

"No, Frank."

"Why not?"

"The less blood we have on our heads the better."

"Where are you going?"

"Turn to the right."

"Aren't ye goin' to Independence?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Idiot! Don't you know they have telegraphed there already, and a hundred armed men are waiting there to take us?"

"I never thought of that."

"This is a time when it is a capital offense not to think."

"Then how can a fellow help it?"

"Turn to the right and keep your mouth shut."

They had left their pursuers out of sight, and as a great many horsemen had traveled both roads, it was hoped that they would not discover where the banditti had turned aside.

Siroc and Jim Malone had begun to show little signs of fatigue as yet, but when they were both four or five miles on the new route Jesse decided it would be better to halt and allow them a few moments' rest.

"Do we dare stop?"

"Yes, it's best."

"They may run in on us," said Frank.

"Run in on us—thunder! We must let our horses rest."

Jesse sprang from the saddle and threw himself down at the root of a giant old oak which spread its branches over a considerable extent of earth.

They were at the bottom of a high hill, and in a small green valley which was covered with a short grass and a few trees.

Frank followed his brother's example, and both lay on the ground, while Siroc and Jim Malone quietly nibbled the grass.

"It won't do to ride too hard," said Jesse. "Better have a foe close behind, if you've a good horse under you, than to be a long distance ahead, with a horse fagged out."

Frank was about to reply when suddenly there came on the air:

Crack, crack-ack!

Bang, bang, bang!

Bullets came rattling through the tops of the trees like hailstones and whizzed about the heads of the bandits.

"Frank."

"Jess."

"Are you hit?"

"No."

"To horse!"

"Aye, aye!"

Both sprang into their saddles at once, and away they flew like the wind.

"Ho, ho! we've got 'em; we've got 'em!" roared one of the pursuers, whom they recognized as Timberlake.

"What does he mean?" Jesse asked.

"I don't know," Frank answered.

But they were soon to realize.

Before them suddenly appeared a deep chasm about twenty-five feet wide, and close behind them came their pursuers shouting:

"We've got 'em! we've got 'em!"

"No, they haven't, have they, Frank?"

"No."

"Now we'll show 'em how to fly."

Their pursuers were close behind, and Frank and Jesse never slackened their speed. On they flew toward the chasm, and their powerful horses both cleared it at a bound. While the horses were in the air, leaping over the chasm, Jesse and Frank turned in their saddles, each holding two cocked pistols, and discharged all four of them at their pursuers.

Safely landed on the other side, they flew up the hill and away.

Like the wind they sped, not stopping to see how their pursuers would get over the chasm or how many had gone down beneath the volley they had given them.

"Fiends seize them!" roared Timberlake's voice. "Shoot them down! bring them down!"

The sharp crack, crack, cracking of pistols and carbines rang out in one almost continuous volley in their rear, and the bullets flew like showers of leaden hail above them, but fortunately neither of them were hit.

Jesse and Frank knew how to make themselves small on the backs of horses.

They drew themselves forward in their saddles and lay down so that they were objects very difficult to hit.

When they were beyond the hill they came to a halt and waited for a moment for their horses to blow.

"Frank, it was a close shave."

"Yes."

"And a tremendous jump."

"You are right, it was."

"No other horses could have made it."

"No."

"There never lived two such animals."

"You are right, brother."

They dismounted and loosened their saddle girths: then, mounting, galloped on, leaving a cloud of dust behind.

They reached a high ridge covered with oak trees. The sun was setting, leaving the western sky bathed in gold.

"Well," said Jesse, as he gazed about them, "this has certainly been a hard day on us."

"And yet we've done well."

"Oh, yes, we've done fair."

"There must be ten thousand dollars at least in that bag you carry, and besides we won a no inconsiderable amount on our horses in the race."

"Yes; but the amount in the bag we must divide with the others," said Jesse, his greediness and reluctance painfully evident.

"That's so," the avaricious Frank answered, with a sigh; "but we will not have to divide the amount we won at the races."

"No, that's our own."

"Did they cross the chasm?"

"I believe not."

"If they had, we could hear them hard after us; but now as I listen I hear nothing."

"They'll go around it, bridge it over or manage by some way to get over at us," said Jesse James.

The bandit brothers only waited a moment and then resumed the gallop.

Siroc and Jim Malone had been hard run, yet both were good for several miles yet. Their hoofs could be heard clattering among the tree-tops as merrily as if they were out for a pleasure gallop.

"Stop, Frank," said Jesse; "it won't do to run them down."

"No."

Frank drew rein, and he and Jesse both came to a standstill.

Jesse dismounted and placed his ear on the ground and listened.

"Do you hear them, Jess?" asked Frank. It had now grown too dark for him to read his brother's features.

"By Jove, I do!"

"What, do you?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then they crossed the chasm?"

"Of course they did."

"How far are they away?"

"About a mile."

Jesse rose from the ground, and for a moment stood by the side of his horse, quite undecided what he would do. At last his resolution was taken.

"Come on, Frank; we'll turn out here," he said.

They turned aside from the main road into a narrow path, which they followed for some time.

Jesse walked first, leading his horse behind him, and Frank rode along behind them. The sounds of pursuers could now be heard by even Frank on the back of Jim Malone.

At last the James Boys came to a considerable stream, across which a log was stretched. The log was a large sycamore tree, off which the bark had been stripped.

"Frank," said Jesse.

"What?"

"We've got to cross this stream."

"Well, we can swim our horses over it."

"We could easily enough, if we could get down to the water; but, unfortunately for us, we can't get down to the water. Don't you see the bluffs are so steep on either side that we can't get up or down?"

"So I see."

"But we must cross over."

"How?"

"Well, Frank, I have the utmost confidence in Siroc."

"So have I."

"He is a sure-footed horse."

"Great Heaven! do you mean to have him walk a log?"

"That's it exactly."

"Well, I never heard of such a thing."

"It has been done."

"Yes, but a single false step—a slip of the foot."

"Would send steed and rider down to death!"

CHAPTER V.

OLD COTTONSOX HAS AN ADVENTURE.

Jesse James led Siroc upon the log which he intended crossing.

The sensible animal seemed to realize just what was required of him, for he went boldly upon the log and Jesse walked over, Siroc following him.

Step by step, with the utmost care, lifting up each foot and putting it down as if he knew his life and the life of his master depended on the precision of his steps, Siroc was equal to the best trained circus horse in the world.

After him followed Frank, riding Jim Malone.

Jesse paused and said:

"Frank, stop until we are over."

"Why?" Frank asked.

"The log sways, and both of us on it at once might break it down."

"True. I'll stay off."

Slowly and cautiously Jesse led his horse across.

The only light he had to guide him over was the moon rising over the eastern hills and illuminating the earth.

It wasn't very high in the sky, but as it shone through a place where the trees had been cut out, and fell full and square on the log, it was bright enough for them to see very well how to get over.

"All right," cried Jesse when he was over the log.

"Are you over?" asked Frank.

"Yes."

"Well, I'll come."

"Be careful."

"I'm going to ride across."

"You had better not."

"Why?"

"A single slip would be certain death."

"But I won't make that slip."

Frank was headstrong almost to stubbornness and forced his horse down upon the log and then across.

Jim Malone had watched Siroc with no little interest and seemed inspired by him, and moved slowly over the log, and finally leaped off onto terra firma.

"Now wasn't that well done?"

"Yes."

"I say, Jess, suppose we disguise ourselves so we can't be known?"

"Well, we'll do it."

"We've got the stuff in our saddle pockets."

"I know it."

Then Jesse and Frank both dismounted, and taking out their saddle pockets, proceeded to put on wigs and false whiskers.

At this moment a voice—a heavy, husky voice—could be heard singing:

"Go it right,
Loose on tight,
The snappin' turtle's
Out to-night."

The song wound up with a wild yell like an Indian war-whoop.

"Jess," said Frank, "what does that mean?"

The rattling of distant wheels at this moment fell on Jesse's ear, and he said:

"It's some farmer going home from town; and I guess he's got a few more drinks than are good for him."

"Listen."

"Whoopee. I'm a roarin' cattermount. The only one original and wild, untamed, horned toad this side o' the Rockies, an' I kin run faster, hit harder, kick furdur, jump higher, 'n fall down harder'n any other man in these 'ere diggin's. Whoopee."

A moment later he struck up a song:

"I was az poor az Job of old,
Goin' round the Horn, goin' round the Horn;
But now I've bags and bars of gold,
In Californ, in Californ."

"Hurrah for the only ring-striped and streaked man-eater o' Missouri, with seventeen rattles and a button."

"I guess he's having it all his own way, Frank," said Jesse.

"Seems that way."

"Suppose we go and see where he had that attack?"

"Agreed."

They galloped forward through the bushes into the road.

There they saw a span of farm horses slowly and contentedly jogging along, while a great, strapping farmer, who reeled first to the right and then to the left, was holding the lines and trying to amuse the team or himself, it would be hard to tell which.

At times the importance of hastening homeward so strongly impressed itself on him as to occasion a loud cluck to his horses, and slapping them with his flat leather lines. The horses responded with a nervous switch of the tail, but failed to increase their speed.

Then the driver relapsed into his careless, indolent state, singing, boasting or pouring his wrath out upon some imaginary person or object.

"It's no use er talkin'," he bawled out at last, "I've got ter have another fight soon ter stir up my stagnant blood."

Then he sang:

"Oh, I'm the boy thet crossed the plains,
Along the Kansas line,
And I kin whip the son of a gun
Thet stol thet mule o' mine.
An Injun or a grizzly bar,
Or anything yer call,
That comes before this arm o' mine,
Yer bet, she's got ter fall."

"Whoopee! I'm a son of a gun from Bitter Creek! I hev traveled over and around the hull sarcumnavigable globe, swum the ocean, jumped over the Rockies at er bound, et Pike's Peak at er single meal, an' picked my teeth wi' the butt cut of a shell-bark hickory."

"Hello!" cried Jesse.

"Hello, thar, yerself! Hooray fur a fight!"

"Who are you?"

"Lew Hutchinson, a mustang wot never war curried. A mule whacker in time o' war—a Missouri farmer in time o' peace."

"Do you live close around here?"

"Yer bet I do. Ain't yer never heerd o' Lew Hutchinson, ther feller wot eats curry-combs and drinks shingle nails in his coffee fur breakfast?"

"No."

"Wall, I'm he."

"Glad to form your acquaintance," said Jesse James.

"I am ring striped and streaked, got seventeen rattles an' a button, an' just a-stinkin' for a fight."

"Yes, I smelt you on the other side of the river."

"D'yer wanter fight? Whoopee!" roared the drunken driver.

"Oh, no, not with one who stinks as you do. Where are you going?"

"Home."

"How far do you live?"

"Erbout five miles."

"Well, Lew, they say you are a very hospitable man."

"Yes, hoss and mule both," interrupted Lew.

"They say you are clever."

"Whoop, I am."

"Social."

"Oh, yes; knock me down ef yer love me. Chaw my eat off, and give me er chance ter fight. I wanter fight."

"We want to go home with you, Lew."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Jerry Potts. Don't you know me?"

"Old Jerry?"

"Yes."

"Yes, I know yer like a book. Who's that with yer, Jerry?"

"My brother Bob."

"Bob Potts?"

"Yes."

"How 'er ye, Bob?"

"Purty well, Lew. How are you?"

"Fust rate, whoopee, only I want ter fight. Did yer hear me singin' when yer come up?"

"Yes."

"Warn't that the gowl rattlin'est song ye ever heerd?"

"I believe it was."

"Made it all myself."

Running on in this rattling way, Lew Hutchinson drove home with his strange guests.

His wife, a little, timid woman, was waiting with a warm supper in the stove for her husband.

Jesse and Frank forced themselves on the farmer, who was too much intoxicated to notice that he was being imposed upon.

Next day they took a short ride in the country to gather up what information they could of their pursuers. But none were in the neighborhood, and they determined to pass another night with Lew Hutchinson.

Lew daily went to town and nightly came home drunk. His eyes were still black from the whipping he had received from Old Cottonsox, as described in our first chapter. Lew would insist that, though he had got a pair of moss agates, he had utterly and completely vanquished his foe.

When Jesse and Frank returned to Hutchinson's house that night they found him a little soberer than on the night before.

Jesse and Frank had explained that they were cattlemen hunting for stags.

"Is there any news in town?" Jesse asked.

"News—great guns, sir—why thar's nothin' but news. The hull town is ring-striped and streaked with news."

"What about?"

"The James Boys."

"What have they done—robbed another train?"

"No—robbed the Kansas City Fair."

Then, in his awkward, drunken, maudlin manner, he proceeded to tell what he had learned about the robbery. He said that Timberlake was hot on their trail, having traeced them over into another country.

"Oh, they ort ter hev me atter them fellers," said Lew, once more assuming his boastful manner. "Oh, I'd eat curry-combs, drink shingle nails and pick my teeth wi' the butt cut o' a shell-bark hickory."

"Maybe they wouldn't care for that as long as you let them alone," said Jesse, with a laugh.

"Let 'em alone?"

"Yes."

"Me let 'em alone?"

"Maybe you'd better."

"Oh, sir, yer don't know me. I'm ring striped and streaked, and I've seventeen rattles and a button. Elf ye want ter fight chew my ear."

Jesse assured him that he himself had no intention of fighting, but if he should come across anybody in his line, he would recommend him most highly.

They went to bed that night and slept soundly.

Next morning the James Boys were awakened by the sound of voices below. Lew Hutchinson had just awakened from a sound nap, and was in no very good humor.

"Now git out o' here, won't yer?" he cried.

"I can't," answered a familiar voice.

"Why?"

"I'm not in."

"Look here, yer a fool."

"Now, that's not original. I've heerd that many times before, and I kin go all around this town and find a dozen men wot'll say the same thing."

"Frank?"

"Jess!"

"D'you know him?"

"Don't you?"

"Of course."

"And so do I."

"What on earth has brought him here?"

"I'll swear I've a mind to kill him and be done with him."

"The best thing to do, Jesse, then we'll know we're safe."

Jesse rose, dressed hurriedly, and crept to the window.

"Can you see him, Jess?"

"Yes."

"Through the window?"

"Of course."

"What does he look like?"

"A poor, forlorn creature."

"Can't you shoot him from there?"

"Yes—hand me my pistol, and I'll soon put him out of his misery."

Frank took one of Jesse's revolvers from its scabbard and carried it to his brother.

"We must get away from here as soon as it's done," said Frank, "or we'll be in trouble."

Jesse cocked the revolver, and had it aimed at the head of Old Cottonsox, when something he said to Lew Hutchinson caused him to lower his weapon and bend his head to listen.

"Say, mistur, ain't yer that air feller called Old Cottonsox?" demanded Lew.

"Yes."

"Yer ther duffer wot tumbled me head over heels down thar'n Dave Galyen's saloon."

"Who, me?" asked Cottonsox.

"Yes, you."

"Waal, now, I didn't go to at all."

"All right; ye fotch me twice. Now come in, and my wife'll git our breakfast. Wot yer doin' in this 'ere country?"

"Ain't er doin' nuthin'."

"Makin' any money of it?"

"No; don't want no money."

"How d'ye live?"

"By eatin'."

"Waal, we'll eat. Old woman, fix our breakfast; an' now, sir, when we've et our breakfast we'll jist go out an' fight."

"Fight?"

"Yes."

"Lor, wot fur?"

"I'm er goin' ter whale the very life out av yer."

"Me?"

"Yes; and I want yer ter eat a good, hearty breakfast. I never like ter see a man take a whippin' on a empty stomach, so fill up."

"All right."

"I want yer to know it, Cottonsox. I kin jist whale the liver out o' you."

"Now I kin go around this town and find a dozen men az will say the same thing."

"Can yer?"

"Oh, yes."

They had both gone in the house now, so that Jesse James could not get a sight of him. But Jesse hated the half idiotic fellow, and he determined to shoot him. Jesse had no fears of him, for he believed him to be what he seemed—a half-witted fellow who was roaming about the country living a sort of precarious existence.

"Jesse?" Frank whispered.

"What?"

"Can't you find a hole in the floor and shoot him through it?"

"No."

"Then let's make one."

"How?"

"Take up a board."

"Oh, no; that would make so much noise he would hear us and run off."

"Don't let him go, for that fellow has annoyed us so much I want him killed."

"Frank?"

"What?"

"Did you hear what Hutchinson said?"

"Yes."

"Well, I've made a discovery."

"A discovery! What kind of a discovery?"

"That fellow, Lew Hutchinson, is the man Old Cottonsox knocked cold as a wedge on the night we entered Dave Galyen's saloon."

"Oh, nonsense; Lew is as big as two of Cottonsox."

"I don't care; that Cottonsox is an athlete and a professional boxer, I'll be bound."

"Well, maybe he is."

"And now," resumed Jesse, "we'll kill him here in the house. There is no doubt but that this Lew Hutchinson and his wife will be suspected of the murder. He had a quarrel with Lew, and they fought. What is more natural than that Lew should kill him?"

"Nothing."

"Neither the wife nor husband can testify in the case."

"No."

"And we will never be suspected."

Then Jesse carefully looked to his pistol which was to do the work, and crept down the stairway.

He halted on the corner of the stairway and listened.

Old Cottonsox was now saying:

"Fight me! La! how wonderful! Why, I never fight."

An idiotic chuckle followed this assertion.

"I'd like mighty blamed well ye'd larn me how."

"How?"

"Yes, how."

"Ter do what?"

"Yer strike ez hard as a jackass kin kick."

"Oh, ye must learn from a jackass."

"Yes, I'm a-goin' ter take a lesson right away after breakfast."

"Well, that's repartee with a vengeance," Jesse said to himself.

"Say, Old Cottonsox, why don't yer capture that twenty thousand dollars?"

"What twenty thousand dollars?"

"Ther reward."

"Fur what?"

"Fur capturin' the James Boys."

At this Jesse James became deeply interested.

What could they mean by speaking of the James Boys?

After a moment's puzzled reflection the man called Cottonsox said:

"La! there's nothing original about that. I kin go all around this town and find a dozen men who'll say the same thing."

"Why don't ye do it?" asked Lew.

"Ah, I don't know the James Boys."

"Yer don't?"

"No."

"Waal, come along with me ald I'll interdooce yer to 'em."

"Whar air they?"

"Right upstairs."

Jesse started at this.

Lew Hutchinson had not been duped and deceived after all. He had known or suspected, drunk as he was, that he was harboring the James Boys, and he was trying to use this half idiotic fellow to assist him.

"Oh, no, no, no—I—I don't want ter go an' see 'em."

"Come along."

"No, excuse me."

"Yer a fool."

"I know it. That's not original, nuther."

"Come with me."

"Hold!"

Jesse James leaped down the stairway, through the stair door, and landed in front of the astounded Lew Hutchinson and Old Cottonsox, a revolver in each hand.

"What's up?" cried Lew.

"You're up."

"I war jist goin' ter have some fun with this fool."

"It'll be your last fun."

Bang went Jesse's pistol.

With the shot there came a shriek, and a broomstick thrust between them struck up the barrel of the revolver. Lew's poor little abused wife had saved his life.

When the smoke cleared away Old Cottonsox was gone.

CHAPTER VI.

THAT GIRL AGAIN.

"Oh, don't, sir, please don't kill him," groaned the woman, falling down upon her knees before Jesse James. "Please don't harm him; oh, don't—don't—don't."

Frank James came bounding down the stairs three or four steps at a time, and cried:

"Shoot her, too! Kill them both."

"Oh, don't, don't, pray don't!"

Jesse James was cooler than his brother. He read by the look of amazement as well as fear on the face of Lew Hutchinson that is was in reality a joke on his part, and that he had not dreamed that the men he was entertaining were the James Boys.

"Oh, sir, I swar, I swar that I didn't know it war you. I was a-jokin', that's all—jist a-jokin'."

The woman appealed to him so strongly, she clung to Jesse's arm and begged him to kill her, if he would, but spare her husband.

Jesse now noticed that Old Cottonsox, the man for whom he had conceived an inexpressible dislike, was gone. Cottonsox was the man he had determined to kill, and he had disappeared.

"Where is he, Frank?" Jesse cried.

"Who?"

"The other, Cottonsox."

"I don't know."

"I would swear he stood right there not ten seconds ago."

"How did he get out?"

"Sank through the floor or melted in the air. By the eternal, I'll find him! If he's mortal I will make him immortal!"

Jesse James was furious.

He flew to the door, Frank following him. Around the house they both ran.

Just then Jesse caught sight of a man's head disappearing around a corner of the log barn.

"There he goes!"

Bang!

The ball knocked off a chunk of rotten wood out of the end of the logs and went whizzing away into the corn field.

Jesse James was not certain who the man was, but was quite sure he saw a man's head, while Frank declared it was only a sunflower waving in the breeze, and showed him the sunflower cut off by his bullet.

At any rate, all search for Cottonsox was unavailing.

Mrs. Hutchinson, weak little woman as she was, was quick witted. No sooper were the James Boys gone out on the search of Cottonsox than she seized her husband by the shoulder and cried:

"Lew, Lew, now is your time."

"Wot yer mean, Polly?" he asked.

"Run—go—fly while you can."

"Why?"

"Those men are the James Boys, and when they come back they will kill you."

"Oh, gosh! Polly."

He started to run in the direction of the barn, but she caught him.

"Hold! hold! don't run that way, or you will run right among them and be killed, certain."

"Whar'll I go, Polly?"

"Through the corn field into the wood——"

She had time to say no more, for like a race horse from the starting point, Lew Hutchinson bounded out of the door, over the low fence, and on and away he flew like a madman, breaking down corn rows, leaping fences like a frightened deer, and stopping not when the forest was reached. On, on and on, out of breath, wild-eyed and furious, in his flight crushing and tearing through the hazel brush until, exhausted, he tumbled off the bank of a creek and plunged into a quagmire, where he lay breathless from exhaustion.

The James Boys returned from a fruitless search for Old Cottonsox with the full determination of killing Lew Hutchinson and leaving the place. "We'll shoot him and be going," said Jesse; but when the house was reached Lew was not there.

"Where is he?" the bandit chief demanded of the frightened wife.

"I—I—don't know, sir. You might search."

"You lie!" roared Frank. "You do know where he is; now go and find him."

"I don't."

"Tell us which way he went."

"I can't."

"Shoot her, Jess. "We'll be sure of that much," thundered Frank.

"Kill a woman?" cried Jesse, who had some spark of manhood in his breast.

"Yes."

"Not I."

"Why?"

"Because she's a woman."

"But she helped her husband to escape."

"Well, what woman would not?"

During the conversation between the brothers, the woman, with deathly pale face, stood trembling before them, silently wringing her hands, and expecting every moment to be launched into eternity.

"Stand aside and let me do it if you are so squeamish about it!" cried Frank, who was furious at the compunctions of conscience displayed by his brother.

As Frank spoke he cocked his revolver and took a step forward.

"No, I won't!" cried Jesse.

"What?"

"I say you shan't hurt her."

"Jess, are you a fool?"

"There's a little humanity left in my soul yet, and I swear you shall not harm a hair of her head."

Frank James was afraid of his brother, and knew that it would be dangerous for him to interpose any further objections to his brother's wishes.

"Frank, you are a coward to dream of killing a woman."

Frank's head hung, and he looked quite crestfallen.

"Come with me."

He cast one furious look at the pale, trembling woman, who was too much overcome to speak, and went away after Jesse.

At the barn they saddled their horses quite leisurely and galloped down the road. For some time both were silent, for Frank keenly felt the rebuke of his brother, and Jesse was chagrined at the loss of Cottonsox.

Frank was the first to speak. He said:

"Jesse, why does that fellow follow us?"

"Who?" asked Jesse, wheeling Siroc about, and expecting to see someone following them.

"Oh, I don't mean following us."

"Then what do you mean?"

"Cottonsox."

"Have you seen him?"

"Not since you shot the sunflower."

"Well, what do you mean?"

"I mean who is Cottonsox?"

"A crazy fellow that annoys me, and I want to kill him."

"Maybe he is not crazy."

"Why?"

"He may be acting."

"No, he is not."

"He might be trying to trick the James Boys."

"Oh, nonsense. You would make him out a detective?"

"Yes."

"He isn't."

"You don't know."

"I do."

"How?"

"I have never yet been fooled by a detective, and I guess I do know."

"Oh, Jesse, you think you are shrewd, but let me tell you you'll be taken in some time when you least expect it."

"When I am, remind me of this morning's conversation."

They rode on in silence for a few miles, when they halted in a deep wood and made some changes in their disguises.

"Where are you goin', Jesse?"

"How far are we from Liberty?"

"Ten miles."

"Then we'll go."

Frank interposed no objection, but Jesse decided not to enter Liberty during daylight. They would wait until night, and then enter without attracting general attention.

They passed the intervening time lying in the bushes, waiting for night to come.

As the shades of night began to fall over the earth, they heard the distant beat of horse's hoofs as someone jogged along, and Jesse said:

"Frank, that's some rich old fellow."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, there's the ring of gold in the very beating of those hoofs."

"Bosh! nonsense! You don't know."

"Just wait and see if I don't fleece a fat old farmer."

Old Squire Skoggs was a rich old country gent of the old-time sort. He had long been the ruling spirit in Mudfog township, and was the one man who, above all others, was authority.

He dressed as of old, wearing the ancient leggings and broad-brimmed hat, and always carried a pocketful of money.

His fat old horse was jogging along with the fat old rider on his back, when suddenly a man mounted on a powerful steed, black as midnight, appeared in the road before them. He came down, riding along until right at his side, when the stranger, whose face he, to his alarm, discovered was masked, had seized his horse by the bit, and, shoving the muzzle of a revolver into his face, cried:

"Stop!"

"What d'ye want?"

"Your money or your life."

"Oh, Lordy, are ye goin' to kill me?"

"Yes, unless you hand over every dollar in your possession, and be quick about it."

"Oh, dear, oh, dear."

"No 'oh dearing' about it; be quick, for I've got a good deal to do to-night, and but precious little time to do it in."

"Oh, oh, oh!"

"Fork it over quick."

"All right; here it is."

He handed over a fat wallet.

"Now your watch."

"Oh, dear me."

"Quick."

"And I just had a new mainspring put in it to-day."

But there was no help for him, he had to hand over the watch, and he did it with becoming grace.

Jesse stripped him of all his valuables, and then bade him good-night, and hoped he would have pleasant dreams and enjoy his

breakfast next morning. When the old fellow was alone he grew furious, and swore he would follow that robber and hang him with his own hands, but after a few moments he grew more calm, and concluded to go home and study on the matter until morning.

"What did you get?" Frank asked, when Jesse joined him.

"Oh, a good fat wallet, I assure you."

"Well, that's good, my boy."

"I'll light a lantern and see."

On investigating he found that he had taken in nine hundred and forty-three dollars and eighty-five cents in money, in addition to a very fine gold watch worth at least five hundred dollars.

"Well, it's dark enough to go to Liberty," said Frank.

"Yes. We'll go to our friend there who always looks after our welfare when in Liberty and stay with him, put up our horses, and then go about the town."

"I want some beer," said Frank.

"Well, Frank, don't go to guzzling beer. A quart might put you under the table with the dogs."

"I tell you I know just when to stop. I know exactly how far to go."

They quietly entered Liberty and went to the house of their friend, who at this very time held a high official position in the State, and told him they wanted their horses put up and carefully fed and groomed.

This was done, and a good warm supper prepared for Jesse and Frank James, after which they decided to take a stroll about Liberty.

The Gilt Edge saloon and gambling house was open and in full blast. The noise of voices in loud conversation, the sound of music and song mingled with rattling glasses indicated the kind of a place it was.

"Let's go in, Jess."

"Why?"

"I want some beer."

"But we might get in trouble."

"No danger. I want a drink, and I'll go my full length to get it."

Jesse and Frank entered the dive, where everything was uproar and confusion. The James Boys depended on their disguises to protect them from observation of their enemies and detectives.

"Hello! who are you?" cried a drunken fellow, staggering up to Jesse.

"Tom Flynn."

"Oh, yes; old Tommy's son wot lives up in Adair."

"Thought I knowed ye."

"You did?"

"Say, ain't yer goin' ter ax an old acquaintance to drink?"

"No."

"Well, yer a blamed old fool, yer—hic—stingy, old good-fur-nuthin'—hic—"

"Get out of my way. You're a drunken loafer."

"Law, now, thar ain't nuthin' original about that. I kin go around this town and find a dozen men as will say the same thing."

Jesse and Frank both started as if a mine had suddenly exploded beneath them, and fixed their astounded eyes on the speaker. It was their strange shadow, Old Cottonsox.

"You here?" cried Jesse.

"Law, yes, and I've been a-hevin' jist two bushel an' three pecks o' fun with the boys. I'm so glad yer come."

"I want to speak with you," said Jesse, taking Old Cottonsox by the arm.

"Yer do?"

"Yes."

"Wot erbout?"

"I've a word or two to say to you. Come with me."

"Can't yer say it here?"

"No. Come on, I'm not going to harm you."

"Say, mister?" growled Old Cottonsox, as he was being led away.

"What do you want?"

"Ain't you ther feller wot shot at me?"

"No."

"Looks mighty like it."

Jesse having got him into a corner of the crowded barroom, asked:

"Why are you following me?"

"Me?"

"Yes."

"I ain't."

"You are!"

"I come here fust."

"But you certainly knew I was coming."

"No, I didn't."

"I believe you are not what you seem."

"Wot do I seem?"

"A fool."

"Lor' bless, I kin go——"

"Never mind that."

"But I kin go around this——"

"Hold on. I said I didn't want to hear that oftener than sixteen hundred times an hour."

At this moment someone touched Jesse's arm.

Looking around he saw a boy with black velvet coat, white trousers, a cap and a handkerchief over it and nearly all his face.

"What do you want?" Jesse asked.

"Won't you drink a bottle of wine with me?"

"Who are you?"

"Noel Todd."

"A relative of George Todd, the great guerrilla?"

"A son. Come over and have a drink. I've an excellent bottle of wine."

He led Jesse over to another part of the room where there was a table, on which were two glasses and a bottle of wine.

"Sit," he said.

Jesse did so.

"Here, take a drink." He poured out some wine in a glass and passed it to him.

"Look here, youngster," said Jesse, "you seem a bit too previous."

"Why?"

"What would you treat me for——"

"Don't drink!" whispered Frank. "I saw him put something in the bottle."

"It's poison."

Someone struck Frank James and he staggered to the centre of the room, then drawing a pistol opened fire, while bottles, glasses and spittoons flew in every direction.

"Foiled—die!" hissed the boy, and, whipping out his dagger, he struck at the bandit chief's heart.

Jesse caught the dagger and it fell to the floor. Tables and chairs were overturned in the melee. The lad strove to fly.

"I'll see who you are," roared Jesse James, and he tore the handkerchief off the boy's face. "Nora Caloway, that girl detective, again," he shouted.

CHAPTER VII.

IN AN ATTIC.

"Now, that ain't original," growled a voice near Jesse, and in the confusion and turmoil of the fight he recognized Old Cotton-sock.

"Curse you! I'll kill you!" he cried.

He snatched his revolver from its scabbard.

But at this moment the whole room was plunged in darkness.

By some strange movement, inexplicable to the James Boys, every lamp was extinguished at the same moment.

Jesse and Frank James were both seized with the same desire—to get out of this gambling den. It was growing decidedly too warm to be comfortable.

Jesse struggled and fought his way to the door.

A dozen inmates of this den of infamy had revolvers and were blazing away like furies. Bullets flew like rain in every direction.

Jesse reached the door and sprang out.

Crash came someone on his shoulders.

"Pursue me, curse you, die!" he hissed, and turning he snapped his empty pistol at the man.

"Hold, Jess, it's me."

"Frank!"

"Yes."

"Come."

Both sprang to their feet.

"Run for it."

The night was dark, but the lights from surrounding buildings revealed the outlines of their forms.

"There they go."

"They are the James Boys," cried another voice.

Crack!

Crack!

Bang!

"Frank, they shan't have it all their own way!" roared Jesse James.

He whipped out a revolver and fired three shots in as many seconds.

A yell of agony followed his fusillade.

Without stopping a second to ascertain whether he had hit

anyone or not, Jesse ran on and overtook Frank. They were now in a dark street without the aid of street lamps.

"Go, Frank, fly!"

Jesse was alongside of his brother and then ahead of him.

"Run, Jess, they are close behind!" cried Frank.

There was a crash.

Jesse struck something, and, stumbling over it, plunged head-long into a ditch that had several inches of water in it.

Frank heard the fall and tried to stay his own career, but in vain. Over he went head first into the ditch.

For a few moments all was still. Then Jesse heard someone moving about in the water, and whispered:

"Frank!"

"No answer."

"Frank!"

Louder this time.

"What?"

"Were you hurt?"

"No; I am wet and muddy."

"So am I."

"Ugh!"

"How are we to get out of here?"

"I don't know. Can't you reach the top?"

"No."

"It's a cellar of a house dug out, and we're in it."

"Well, yes; that's about the same conclusion I had arrived at."

"Let me see."

"Can't, it's too dark."

Then there was a brief silence. The sound of excited men and hurrying footsteps could be heard along the street above.

"I guess we'd better wait here for a while," said Jesse.

"It seems so."

"The James Boys, the James Boys, twenty thousand dollars reward."

"Twenty thousand!"

"Down 'em."

"Catch 'em."

"Kill 'em."

"Twenty thousand, dead or alive."

"Well, it's not a pleasing prospect," said Jesse, coolly. "I don't know but it is about as unpleasant up there as it is down here."

"Jess?"

"What?"

"Do you reckon they'll hunt for us in here?"

"Well, I hope not."

"They would hardly think we'd make this a stopping place."

"We didn't from choice."

The crowd was hurrying by, hooting and yelling, among them some of the drunken rowdies from the saloon where the James Boys had come so near losing their lives.

Jesse waited until all was quiet, and then whispered:

"Frank?"

"What?"

Frank was shivering with cold and dampness.

"Come here."

"Where?"

"Right under this projecting beam."

"Well, I can't reach that."

"I can."

"Why it's as high as both of us."

"I know it. Stand here; brace yourself."

"What are you going to do?"

"Climb on your shoulders."

Frank and Jesse had practiced athletics ever since they were boys, and now they found it of great advantage to them.

Jesse sprang on Frank's shoulders.

"Hold steady!"

"I will."

"I am going higher."

Then he placed his foot on Frank's head.

"Steady, very steady," he whispered.

He reached up to his full length. He tip-toed, and by extending his hands upward reached the beam and swung himself up to it.

Then, locking his legs about the end of the beam, he hung downward, and Frank caught his hands and climbed up his body to the beam, and both were out of the ditch in a few moments.

"Now where, Jess?" Frank asked.

"We'll have to get out of this town soon. Follow me."

"Lead on."

"Come."

Down a dark street they were groping their way, when all at once the sound of voices came to their ears.

"Stop," Jesse whispered.

"What?"

"Hark—don't you hear those voices?"

Both the James Boys listened intently, and heard the following:

"Nora, you spoiled all."

"But, oh, I want to kill him."

"I know it."

"And he wouldn't drink the wine."

"Was it poisoned?"

"Yes."

"How did he learn it?"

"The other fellow told him."

"Frank?"

"Yes."

"Well, they are shrewd."

"But I'll kill him. He killed my poor husband. Oh, Henry, Henry, you shall be avenged—you shall be avenged!" the voice of the woman could be heard saying.

"Trust all to me."

"I will."

"You see that when I am obeyed we have success, but when you allow your anxiety to get the better of your judgment and prudence failure is the result."

"Carl Greene, I'll obey you."

"Do so, Nora."

"Where are they now, Carl?"

"I don't know, but they are in this town."

Jesse James walked backward. He caught Frank's hand and drew him a little further away, and then whispered:

"A pretty mess—a lively prospect, I swear."

"Where are they, Jess?"

"I don't know—can't see anything."

"But I hear them."

"So do I."

"Let's kill 'em."

"If we can find them we will. One is Carl Greene and the other Nora Caloway, Pinkerton's famous detectives."

"Jess, let's find them."

"I am willing, if we can."

"But we've got to keep our eyes open or we will run our necks in a halter. It was those two who brought us to grief before."

"Yes—and Carl Greene is the best hot in the world."

"I know it—except Jesse James."

"Well, he's about as good with the pistol as you."

"I may admit that; but not better."

"Let's find 'em."

"Do you go to the right and I to the left."

They separated according to Jesse's directions, and groped their way along through the darkness until they heard the sounds of voices.

Jesse James came in contact with a board fence. He crept along this, stooping low to the ground to be in the shadow of the fence as much as possible. At last he reached a wall.

It was a board wall, and just beyond it came the voices again.

"Nora, it's no use," one voice said.

"That's Carl Greene's voice. I would know it among a thousand," Jesse James said to himself.

"Why?"

The last voice was Mrs. Nora Caloway, the wife of the man he had shot.

But Jesse listened while the other continued:

"Jesse James is a remarkable man. I don't mean remarkable for goodness, but for his shrewdness. He is brave, cunning and cautious, and there is no need to make a dash at him unless you are sure."

"But your methods, Carl Greene, have not been successful."

"They will be. I have set out to trick the James Boys, and I'll do it yet."

"I am out of heart."

"Why?"

"I am afraid you will fail."

"Have I ever failed?"

"No."

"Did I not succeed when sent to capture Siroc? True, the James Boys stole him back, yet I succeeded in capturing him."

"Yes, you did."

"And when we started out to capture them, was it a failure?"

"No."

"We succeeded well."

"Yes."

"And we will again."

"Where in the world are they?" Jesse James asked himself. "They must be just beyond this wall. Oh, if I could only draw a bead on him."

At this moment Jesse James became aware that someone was crawling up toward him.

He crouched lower to the ground, and clutched his pistol. Some-

one was coming along the very wall against which he was crouching. He held his revolver at full cock.

Now his keen, cat-like eyes make out the dark outlines of someone, and he had a dead aim at the object. But caution came to his rescue. Would it be best to shoot the man who was coming, or knife him?

The knife was more silent and fully as deadly, and Jesse James determined on using it. He put up his pistol, as the report would startle the entire village, and drew his long, keen-bladed dagger, and held it ready.

But as Jesse waited he reflected that this might not be one of his enemies. He had separated from his brother Frank, and this fellow creeping up along the wall might be Frank.

Jesse determined to wait and see who it was before he struck.

He held his dagger ready, and, crouching close upon the ground, made ready to spring.

Nearer and nearer came the dark shadow, until it was within reach, and then he made his spring. He caught the dark object by the arms and held it fast.

For several seconds there was a silent struggle, but Jesse was the master. Holding him fast he whispered:

"Frank!"

"Jess, is that you?"

"Yes."

"What did you do that for?"

"I was not sure it was you."

"What have you discovered?"

"Nothing. What have you?"

"They are in a house."

"Who?"

"Carl Greene and the woman."

"A house?"

"There is an open window, and, the breeze being favorable, blows all sounds right over to us."

"You may be right. Where is the house?"

"On the other side of the wall."

Jesse was silent for several moments. They had been driven to desperation by Pinkerton's daring detective, Carl Greene, and the James Boys were determined to kill him.

"Frank?"

"What?"

"Are you willing to dare what I dare?"

"Well—yes, I guess so."

"We must scale that wall and get into the house."

"All right."

"We'll do it right away. Come, make yourself a step-ladder for me."

Frank placed himself against the wall, and Jesse climbed up on his shoulders to the top, where he paused and pulled Frank up after him. When they had gained the top they began feeling about them. The house was so near they could touch it with their hands.

The porch was but little higher than the wall, and Jesse, seizing the lattice work, rapidly ascended to the porch. Frank followed him.

Here they found a ladder which led to the attic window.

"Frank?"

"What, Jess?"

"Let's go up to the attic."

"All right; maybe we can get in by the attic."

"Very good."

They climbed up through the attic and paused.

Frank's foot was on the round when a rocket roaring upward lit the scene bright as day, and a wild roar below announced their discovery.

"Inside!" whispered Jesse.

Frank sprang in as a volley of bullets whizzed against the attic.

CHAPTER VIII.

"IKE."

"We're gone!" gasped Frank, as they entered the attic.

"Nonsense."

"Why, Jess, there are a thousand down there."

"I don't care if there are. We will make it all right. We'll get out of this."

"How?"

"I don't know, but somehow."

The whole town had been roused, it would seem, for men with torches and lanterns were running hither and thither in every direction.

"That fellow comes too close," said Jesse.

Crack! rang out Jesse's revolver, sharp and keen on the air, followed by a yell of pain and rage.

Then a roar went up which seemed to swell into an earthquake.

"There they are, there they are!" thundered half a hundred voices.

"Did you hit your man?" Frank asked.

"Yes."

"Kill him?"

"No, he's limping away. There, he has gone off and is sitting under a tree. I suspect he is sick."

"I wish we could make him more sick."

"Frank, we are in bad shape."

"That's what I said all along."

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Heavy muskets were thundering forth their deadly contents from below, and the building being only a slight frame, the bullets came through as if it were pasteboard. It was dangerous in the attic.

"Jesse, let's go down below."

"All right. I'll go down and kill Carl Greene, the detective. That job will be over."

"And I will kill the woman," said Frank.

"Frank James, you have a mania for killing women."

"Well, I delight to kill anybody who is an enemy."

Another volley of musket balls whizzing through the weak walls and covering the James Boys with splinters accelerated their movements some.

They found the stairway, but as it was very dark Jesse was forced to light his pocket lantern and light the way downstairs.

"Frank, cock your revolvers and follow."

"Aye, aye. I'm on hand."

Down the first flight they ran, but found only empty rooms on the second floor.

No one was to be seen, though Jesse and Frank hurriedly ransacked every room and looked under every bed.

Then they went to the floor below and here they had no better luck.

"Jess, they are gone," said Frank.

"So it seems."

Bang, crash, whiz!

A ball came whizzing through the window, and grazed the cheek of Frank.

"Jess, douse the glim," cried Frank.

Jess waited for no second bidding, but put out the light and left the room in total darkness. Frank James grew nervous, and crept up to his brother and asked what they were to do.

"I don't know."

"They are all around us, Jess."

"I wish we could get to the barn where Siroc and Jim Malone are."

"I believe we had better surrender."

"Surrender?"

"Yes."

"Thunder, no."

"Why not?"

"Be taken to jail again? No."

"But if we don't we'll both die."

"Then, by the eternal, we'll die."

"What are you going to do?"

"We will open fire on them."

There came a jingling of glass in another room.

"There, there!" gasped Frank, shrinking down to the floor.

"Where? What?"

"Someone is breaking in at the back window."

"Coward, get up."

Jesse ran to the window with a pistol in each hand.

Bang, bang, bang!

A stream of fire seemed to pour from the muzzles of his revolvers, and the intruders, who were about to break through into the house, broke away, and ran pell-mell in every direction.

Jesse returned to where Frank was, and ordered him to take his place at the next window. Frank complied, and firing a few shots drove away a besieging party.

"Charge on 'em!" roared one.

"No; roast 'em!" shouted another.

"Burn 'em out!"

"Tear down the house and kill 'em like rats in a trap."

These and a hundred other like uncomfortable expressions reached the ears of the James Boys.

"Frank!"

Jesse spoke very sharply, for, by the light from distant torches shining in the apartment, he could see his brother.

"What?" Frank returned.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"You lie, you are! Now put down that white rag. You are going to wave it in token of surrender."

"Jesse, it's death."

"Let it be."

"But I don't want to die."

"I'll die before I'll surrender."

"Oh, they'll kill us."

"Put down that white rag."

"I won't."

"What!"

"I am going to surrender."

"Frank James, if you wave that white flag I'll kill you with my own hand."

"We'll both be killed."

"We'll die like men."

Jesse had often kept Frank from surrendering.

It had frequently been said that if Jesse James was dead Frank would go in and give himself up. Everybody declared that he had not the stuff in him to fight alone. Jesse was not only the brain but the courage of both.

"It's no use talking, Jesse, we'll be killed."

"Look out—here they come!"

A wild roar of yells could at this moment be heard.

"Bring 'em out! Tear down the house! Have 'em out!" thundered a score as one man.

Three musket balls struck the panel of the door, splitting it, and Jesse was slightly wounded in the face by a splinter.

Like a madman he flew to the shattered panel, thrust out an arm, and emptied six chambers of his revolver almost in the faces of the men who were rushing on the door.

Two or three went down, and the others, howling like wolves, beat a retreat.

Jesse and Frank fought like madmen, but what could two do against so many?

Both had received some slight and trifling wounds. Jesse was thinking of making a raid at one of the windows, when Frank cried:

"We're gone now."

"Why?"

"Don't you hear flames—don't you smell burning wood?"

"I believe I do."

Roaring, crackling flames and falling sparks and cinders told them that their time was short.

Jesse was cool and unmoved and Frank was sobbing.

As the flames lighted up the rooms the besieging party could see the men inside, and began shooting at them.

Jesse James coolly walked to the windows and pulled down the blinds so they could not see them.

Then he began debating in his mind at which point the last grand sortie should be made.

"Jesse."

"What's that? Frank did you speak?"

"No."

"Who was it?"

"It seemed to come from the floor."

"So I thought."

"Jesse!"

"Frank, was that you?"

"No."

At this moment a section of the floor was pushed up and a head appeared.

"Ike, Ike!" cried Jesse.

"Ike!" yelled Frank.

"Hush!"

"You have come to save us?" said Frank.

"Yes."

"Oh, thanks."

"Can we escape that way?" Jesse asked.

"No."

"What do you mean to do?"

"All is right; obey me."

"We will."

"Follow me."

"Where are you taking us, Ike?"

"This is a cistern well beneath this house. If you lose your hold you will fall in the water."

Down the ladder until but a few inches above the water the trio crept. Taking their knives Jesse and Frank dug desperately into the wall of the cistern, digging at an upward slant, until they broke through the surface at a point about eight feet from the burning house.

At this moment there was a thundering crash, and the angry, roaring flames leaped higher than before as the house collapsed into a heap of blazing ruins.

CHAPTER IX.

THE STAGE COACH.

"We've got em this time, boys," said one of the mob. "We'll find the bones of two skeletons down there."

Meanwhile, Ike, Jesse and Frank lay quiet in the well, waiting for the flames to subside that they might escape in the darkness.

"They are in that heap on the left!" cried one of the men. "There they are!"

"Waal, now, yer mought be mistaken," said a voice which the James boys recognized as that of Old Cottonsox. "Ez the old song says, 'thar's many a slip 'twixt cup an' lip.'"

"What do you mean, sir?" asked a constable who had been giving particular attention to what he said.

"I guess ye'd better all go to yer beds," said Old Cottonsox.

"I think Old Cottonsox is one of the James crowd!" said one man. "He knows more about 'em than he'll tell."

"That's so."

"Then hang him and make him tell."

"Well, let's do it."

"I'm in for it."

"So am I."

"Come on, then."

But Old Cottonsox had disappeared. He could not be found, though they searched for him thoroughly.

The fire was now burned low, and it was growing dark where it had been. A part of the wall fence which had stood around the house having partly burned, fell in over the very place where the James Boys were.

Jesse began at once to burrow out under it.

The ground was very loose and easily dug through. Jesse and Frank made their way through it to the opposite side of the wall, Ike following.

"Wait," Ike whispered when they were on the opposite side.

"Why?"

"Let me take the lead."

They followed him along the dark street, climbed a fence and went across some vacant lots. Then they emerged into another street, crossed it, and were in an alley.

"There's the barn," said Frank.

"Yes, your horses are there!" Ike answered.

"Let's mount and be going."

"All right."

They entered the barn, and soon had their horses saddled and bridled ready for mounting. They led them out in the alley, and Jesse had put his foot in the stirrup to mount when a voice in the darkness, but close at hand, said:

"I say, mistur?"

"What?"

Quick as a flash Jesse's revolver was out.

"Don't shoot!" whispered Ike.

"That air is a plaguey good hoss wot yer ridin'."

"Who are you?"

"Old Cottonsox."

"What are you doing here?"

"Waal, yer see, them fellers over thar wanted ter string me up bekase I wouldn't help 'em git the James Boys, an' I wouldn't nary time, yer bet."

"Are you a friend to the James Boys?"

"Don't know 'em."

"If you did know 'em would you be their friend?"

"Waal, yer know, that kinder depen's on whether they treated me white, yer know. Ef they war good ter me I couldn't go back on 'em, could I?"

"No."

"But then I don't know 'em."

"Well, Cottonsox, I hope we'll be friends."

"So do I."

"Come with us."

"No, I'm goin' up in this 'ere stable loft and take a snooze."

There was not a word from Ike; having rendered his service, he merely stepped out of the way. He disappeared in the darkness, and Jesse and Frank, not a little surprised at his strange disappearance, put spurs to their horses and left the town at a gallop.

There was a few minutes silence, and then a swelling roar down in the direction of the town could be heard.

"They've escaped! They've dug out! They've dug their way out?" roared the crowd.

"Where'll we find 'em?"

"I know where their horses are."

"Let's go to their horses."

"Get their horses!"

With roars and yells the mob came to the barn.

An upper door of the barn swung open at this moment, a head protruded from it, and a man with a grin said:

"Two minutes too late."

Through the coal region in Southwest Missouri, a decidedly rough part of the world, a stage coach was slowly rumbling along over the rough, uneven road.

The passengers were made of the usual class that travel.

There was the fat commercial traveler, with his white plug hat and its dark band, and his big ring on his little finger.

There was the old maid school teacher from the Northern Normal, with her dark, high cheek bones and sallow complexion. There was the young lady and the hysterical aunt, the rich farmer, and an old fellow with a battered, faded white hat, who looked as if he had just escaped from an asylum. He was seedily attired, and looked as if he was in the last stages of poverty.

His face was smoothly shaven, his eyes wide open, and he wore a sort of perpetual grin that was almost silly.

The man with the battered hat pretended to be asleep.

The rumbling coach drowned the snores.

At last the hysterical aunt, who was sitting by the side of her niece, said:

"Hush, Alice. I don't want to hear another word from you."

The man with the battered hat listened.

"But aunt."

"Hush!"

"I won't."

"Well, go on, then, and shatter my nerves."

"I don't want to go there."

"Well, you'll go, all the same."

"I'm no longer a child."

"I know it."

"And I don't see why I am to be treated as one."

"I do."

"Why?"

"Because you don't show the judgment of a woman. You don't know when you are well off."

"I do. I will not marry him, aunt."

"Won't marry Mr. Cook?"

"No, I will not."

"Hush, child, you don't know what you are talking about."

"I do."

"But I say you shall."

Then came a silence, broken only by the rumbling of the stage and sobs of someone. The man with the battered white hat was now all attention, though he pretended to be asleep.

Suddenly he straightened himself up. His peculiarly oldish face, but dimly lighted by the stage lamps gazed for a moment at the sobbing girl, and said:

"Say, Sis, wot's ther matter with yer?"

"Who are you?" demanded the woman.

"Old Cottonsox," was the answer.

"What do you want?"

"Want ter know wot's ther matter with the gal."

"Keep your mouth shut."

"I want ter know wot's ther matter with that ar gal."

By this time the passengers who had been dozing in their seats were awake, and the cross man demanded to know what in the name of the d—l and Tom Walker was the matter.

"That air gal's er cryin'," said Old Cottonsox.

"What are you crying about?" demanded the cross man.

"Gentlemen," said the scheming aunt, who was equal to the emergency, "that fellow is a vile upstart—"

"All I want to know, madam," Old Cottonsox interrupted, "is jist why yer goin' ter make yer niece marry Mr. Cook, and why she don't want to?"

"Shut your mouth, you dog!"

"Ah, gentlemen—gentlemen," cried the sobbing girl, "don't let me be sacrificed in such a way!"

"What do you mean?"

"My aunt wants to make me marry a man I don't love—a man I hate!"

"Great goose grease, gal, then don't yer do it!" put in Old Cottonsox.

The excitement was intense, and everybody in the stage was wide awake. The cross man was ready to take sides with either party, and the old woman almost ready to pull Old Cottonsox by the hair.

There was a few moments of confusion, when everybody was talking and all trying to see who could talk the loudest; then came a clear voice from without:

"Halt!"

"Who is that?" screamed the ill-natured man.

"Oh, it's all right, I guess," the old woman answered.

"Stand! Pull up or a bullet!" the same sharp, determined voice without called.

"Oh, we'll all be killed—we'll all be killed!" cried one nervous woman.

But the restless, nervous aunt seemed to really enjoy the discomfiture of everybody. There was a smile on her face which was almost demoniacal.

The driver of the stage coach had drawn rein and was parleying with a dozen masked horsemen, who were gathered about the stage coach, holding cocked revolvers in their hands.

"I'd like to know what you fellers want?" growled the driver.

"Is this the mail coach for Brunswick?"

"Yes."

"That's the coach. She was to be on this stage."

"That is the one, no doubt of it."

"What d'yer mean, anyway?" asked the driver. "Are yer goin' ter rob the stage?"

"No. Is Miss Alice Brooks on board the stage?"

"I don't know the names o' my passengers," said the driver.

"Well, we'll find out."

Then the man on the white horse tapped the glass door of the stage coach with the muzzle of his revolver and called:

"Hello, within!"

"Law sakes, man, wot yer want?" asked Old Cottonsox.

"Get out of there."

"Why, boys, wot yer reckon he wants we uns to git out o' ther stage fer?"

"Get out and you will see."

"Sit still, ladies, and they will probably not disturb you," said another gentleman passenger.

Old Cottonsox pushed open the door and stepped out upon the ground.

"There, sir, stand over there," said one.

"Now, next," put in the man who rode the white horse.

The men descended from the coach and took their places in a row.

"Come, now, we want the women," said the man on the white horse.

"Wot do yer want?"

"Miss Alice Brooks."

"Miss Brooks. She ain't 'ere on the books."

"Yes, she is," cried the aunt, at this moment poking her detestable head from the door of the stage.

"Oh, aunt, aunt, why did you say that?" wailed Alice.

"It's all right, Alice. Noah Cook won't let you be hurt."

"Come, Miss Alice, get out. You are the only jewel aboard this coach that we want," said a man who was standing at the door.

"Oh, don't—don't let them take me away. They are goin' to carry me away. Pray don't let them."

"You can't do her any good. We're four to one, and every man's a dead shot. This young lady will not be harmed; we have come to carry her to her husband."

"Her husband?" asked several.

"Yes. She fled from her husband an hour after marriage."

"It was a forced marriage. I never consented, and now they are dragging me back to the man I despise. Oh, the wretch!"

"Noah Cook is a good man, Alice," cried the aunt. "D'you go along now and quit bein' so foolish."

The man on the white horse placed her on the saddle before him, and shouting:

"Hush! Away!" they all wheeled about and galloped off into the wood.

"Waal, now, ef ever thar war a downright dead rotten shame, that's one," said Old Cottonsox, as the cavalcade galloped away with the girl. "I, for one, ain't a-goin' to stand it. Unharness them horses."

"Why?" asked the driver.

"We'll mount and follow them."

"No, you won't," cried the old woman.

"Why not?"

"She is being carried to Noah Cook."

"Yes, against her will."

"It's none of your business."

"I'll make it my business."

The old woman flew into a fury, and stalking down to where the eccentric old fellow called Cottonsox stood, she shook her fist in his face, and, in a voice that trembled with rage, said:

"This is my affair, sir, and if you go to meddling with it, I will box your ears for you."

Old Cottonsox had almost forgotten his character, and in his rage his eyes blazed with fury. His grammar and pronunciation greatly improved.

"Madame, you've had a hand in this."

"What if I have," she answered. "It's my affair, old clodhopper, and you can't help yourself."

"Well, I'll see."

"Here they come back!" someone cried.

Old Cottonsox was seen to thrust his hand under his ragged coat, as if to seize a weapon; but prudence, no doubt, got the better part of valor.

A party of six mounted men, wearing black masks over their faces, and riding coal black or dark gray horses, galloped up to the stage.

"Halt!" roared a tall, powerful man, mounted on a powerful black horse.

"These are not the same men."

"More road agents," cried another.

"Who are they?"

"That leader has the voice of Jesse James."

"Jesse James?"

"Yes."

"Surrender, here and now, gentlemen, hand over your jewels, and money, and watches, and such small and trifling things as diamonds."

"Amazement sat enthroned on the face of everyone."

"Come, come, hand over your jewels."

"Law, mistur, now that ain't nateral, I've heerd o' that afore to-night," said one of the passengers of the stage.

"What, Cottonsox, are you here?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"Been robbed."

"By whom?"

"Dun know."

The chief of this banditti was none other than Jesse James. He looked at the silly fellow who had aided him on a very recent occasion to escape, and whom he, of course, regarded as a friend. There was an air of incredulity in that look.

"Cottonsox, are you lying to me?" he asked.

"No. The prettiest jewel we had was just now stole an' carried off."

"They only took her to her husband," said the old woman.

"But, madame, it was the greatest outrage I ever saw perpetrated," put in one of the gentlemen.

"Attend to your business."

"I think everybody ought to speak."

"Why are you all against me?"

"Why did you want the poor child abducted and carried off?"

"Only to her husband," cried the old woman, in a wild, hysterical manner. And then, with a strange, unnatural laugh, she resumed:

"Ha, ha, ha! Didn't I give her my nephew for a husband. Noah Cook is a fine young man. Ha, ha, ha! There is none better. He's a sister's child, and if we can manage to capture the great fortune between us, which is coming to that girl, we will both be rich. It's fifteen millions; that's all."

Jesse James, who had caught the wrong meaning from the woman, asked:

"Madame, do you mean to say the robbers carried off fifteen millions?"

"Yes."

Accustomed as he was to daring business by wholesale, Jesse James was taken completely aback by the announcement.

Old Cottonsox, either from shrewdness or his peculiar derangement laughed and chuckled over the perplexity of the James Boys.

Jesse turned to Frank and said:

"Frank?"

"What, Jess?"

"Why, that's more than we ever did."

"Of course."

"Think, boys, fifteen millions."

"Git it back, git it back," chimed in Old Cottonsox.

The suggestion of a fool has its weight in the deliberation of wise men.

"Why not get it back, Jesse?" the avaricious Frank asked.

"Can we?"

"Yes."

"It would be no easy matter."

"It cannot have been a great while since the robbery was committed, and we can follow them up, run them down, and retake the fifteen millions."

"I say, mistur," put in a voice which had of late grown quite familiar to the James Boys, "that ar hoss o' yours is a mighty all-fired good annemil, and I jist bet he could run down them robbers."

This remark, foolish as it was, and uttered by a man he thought to be an idiot, recalled Jesse James to the question in hand.

He turned to the driver, who, sad and dejected, with downcast eyes, stood by his leaders.

"How many of the robbers were there?"

"Well, about twelve or fourteen."

"How were they dressed?"

"Well, I dun know, stranger. One feller who was boss rode a white hoss, and all had black somethin' over their faces, and every man had a pistol."

"How long since they were here?"

"Well, 'tain't more'n ten minutes."

"Well, boys, we can overhaul 'em," said Jesse, returning to his men for further consultation.

"They've only been gone ten minutes," he said.

"And our horses are better than theirs."

"Of course."

"Which way did they go?"

"I don't know: I'll ask that foolish fellow who was here. Where is Cottonsox?"

But Old Cottonsox had effected one of those curious and mysterious disappearances which he so often executed. Jesse looked in vain for him everywhere.

"Ask the driver?" said Jim Cummins.

Jesse then turned to the driver and asked:

"Which way did they go?"

"Sou'east, boss."

"Southeast?"

"Yes."

"And only ten minutes ago?"

"Not fur from it, sir."

"Boys, we'll 'ave 'em. Come on."

As they galloped away after the villains, Alice Brooks' aunt, Hattie Collins, said:

"Now, there they go to take the fifteen millions away from Noah."

Jesse heard this remark, and he said:

"Yes, we'll take the fifteen millions from Cook or we'll know the reason. Think, boys, a million and a half each."

"Oh, I am afraid we'll lose it," cried Cummins.

"I am, too," put in Frank; "with a million and a half I will yet be governor of Missouri."

"Ha, ha, ha, Jess!" laughed Cole Younger, "your brother has political aspirations."

"Yes. He's a fool!"

"Complimentary, quite."

"Hello, what's the matter, Siroc?"

"He sees something."

"Boys, grab your pistols."

Every member of the desperate band drew a deadly revolver and leaned forward in their saddles, trying hard to pierce the gloom.

But the road led through a dense wood, dark even in daylight, and on this night intensely dark.

While the bandits were deliberating on what to do, a voice, which to Frank and Jesse James was familiar, said:

"I say, mistur, that air hoss o' yourn is the dog gondest finest annamil I ever sot eyes on in my life."

"Cottonsox!"

"Yes."

"Is that you?"

"It air."

"What are you doing?"

"I kim ter show yer ther road."

"Do you know the way the robbers went?"

"I guess they went to the coal mines."

"To the coal mines?"

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

"Six miles sou-east."

"Southeast?"

"Yes."

"Then let's go."

"I say, mister, ef I had a hoss I'd like ter go with you."

"Cole, won't your horse carry double?"

"No; but Jim Younger's will."

"Jim, let him mount behind you. This fellow may be of service to us."

"All right," Jim answered.

Jim Younger, like all the others of the bandits, had no thought of anything save the million and a half dollars which he was sure he was going to receive.

The man called Old Cottonsox was mounted behind Jim Younger, and the party again thundered along the dark road.

About two miles from the coal mines all were startled by the flash and report of a pistol. A bullet hummed through the air within a few inches of the head of the bandit king of America.

"Halt!" cried Jesse James.

In a moment every horseman drew rein.

"Close up, charge."

It was an old guerrilla dash, and as a man started up from behind a stump, he went down beneath a withering fire.

On they thundered right to the mouth of the coal shaft. It was a deserted coal shaft, an old worked out mine.

"Where are they now?" Jesse James asked.

"I say, mister," drawled out old Cottonsox, "I didn't know but maybe they went in thar."

"Where?"

"In that coal mine."

Jesse sprang from his saddle and took a step toward the coal shaft, when he suddenly bethought him of another plan.

"Is that fellow we ran down dead?" he asked.

"I don't know," Jim Cummins answered.

"Jim, run down and see."

Jim wheeled his horse about and galloped away. He was gone about five minutes, when he came back, and said that the wounded man was insensible, and he believed he was dying.

"Couldn't get a word out of him?" asked Jesse.

"Not a word."

"Well, we'll have to explore this coal shaft. Who'll go down in it?"

There was a dead silence. A man entering a dark underground shaft like that required the strongest nerves possible, and the James Boys, as well as others, might hesitate.

"I am going for one," said Jesse James, "and I want two more. Who'll go?"

"I will, mistur," put in the eccentric fellow calling himself Old Cottonsox.

"You?"

"Yes, me. Why can't I go down thar? I've got regler cat's eyes."

"I'll make the third," put in Cole Younger.

Jesse James gazed at the small, shrinking, shivering form of Old Cottonsox, who looked like a withered stalk of corn, and asked him:

"Were you ever in this mine?"

"No, not this'n. I've been down in coal mines."

"Have you?"

"Yer kin jist bet I hev."

"Well, I guess we three will explore this mine. Look about, boys, and see if we can find some kind of a lantern."

They searched the cabins, and Old Cottonsox found a lantern filled with oil and lighting it announced that he was ready.

They went back to the mouth of the coal pit, and Old Cottonsox, with a cheerful grin on his idiotic face, stepped into the car. Jesse and Cole Younger joined him, and the big crank began to unwind, and they were lowered down into the bowels of the earth.

CHAPTER X.

COTTONSOX FINDS A CELLAR.

There was an air of deep mystery about those frightful depths to which they were descending.

At last the tub struck the bottom of the rock, and Old Cottonsox, rising up, looked all around them.

"Wall, now here we air," he said, in a deep, guttural voice, which sounded perfectly horrible in that underground apartment.

"Yes, and where are we?" asked Cole.

"As near the infernal regions as I care to be," answered Jesse.

"Waal, mistur, I kin go all around this town and find a dozen men as will say the same thing."

"You have worn that threadbare."

"Now, that ain't original. I've heard that afore—I hev," said the eccentric individual who had given himself the name of Cottonsox.

"Well, let's begin to search for those fellows, Cole."

"All right."

"Which way shall we go? Here are two subterranean passages leading off in different directions, and we don't know which to take."

"Go to the right," said Cole.

"Why?"

"Oh, no reason for it at all, save that when I am puzzled about any question, I always go to the right."

"It's a habit, is it?"

"Yes, or rather a superstition."

"I don't care much for superstitions."

"Ha, see—look—see and behold!" interrupted Cottonsox. "Wot yer call that air, mistur?"

He held up a dagger. It was a double-edged dagger with an ivory handle, and the guards of silver.

On the handle was the name N. Cook.

"N. Cook, who he is?" Jesse asked, somewhat absent-mindedly.

"Ther feller."

"What fellow?"

"Him az stole ther jewel—the big, heaping amount o' treasures."

"The fifteen millions."

"That air it, boss."

"And that leads off to the left. Come, Cole, let's follow it." Jesse James, when money was at stake, was almost wild. He was reckless and desperate on all occasions.

Not so with Cole Younger, however, for no sooner had Cole

become assured that the men they were pursuing were near than caution began to assert itself.

"Hold on a moment," Cole Younger said.

"Why?"

"Jess, there's something you haven't considered."

"I have considered that there's fifteen millions down here, and we're going to have it."

"But that fifteen millions is guarded by fourteen men, Jesse, and all as well armed as we."

"What of that? Are you a coward?"

"No. But fourteen to two—seven to one—and they the advantage of having a knowledge of the place. Think, Jess; allow your common sense to prevail in such a case."

Jesse reflected a moment, and said:

"No, we had better use a little caution. Though I've fought fourteen alone myself."

"That was above ground, and not below."

"All right, as we are below the earth we'll exercise a little more caution than we would have used above. But we will never give up that fifteen millions. It's ours—it's mine—we'll have it."

Old Cottonsox was following the left branch or tunnel, holding the lantern above his head.

Jesse observed his recklessness, and said:

"Cole, that fool is a good shield for us."

"Yes, he'll draw their fire."

"He is one of the oddest cases I ever met."

"I think he is."

"I wish I knew his history."

"Can't you get his name?"

"He says it is Old Cottonsox, that's all he'll give me."

"Cottonsox, that's not his name."

"He seems to think it is."

The eccentric individual exercised but very little caution.

He was daring or reckless, for with the lantern above his head, he went boldly forward, as though he was searching for sheep that had strayed, instead of dangerous men.

"Jess, do you think he is what he seems?" Cole asked, in a whisper.

"Yes. Why not?"

"There seems a method in his madness."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes. I doubt very much if he is mad."

"But, Cole, he is our friend."

"He seems to be."

"We have as incontrovertible proof of his being our friend as we have of Ike being our friend."

"Where is the proof?"

"He saved our lives."

"When?"

"At Liberty. When the mob had driven us into a barn, he came there and told us to run, and he remained behind, and I've no doubt but that Old Cottonsox put them on the wrong track."

"What does Ike say about him?"

"Ike doesn't know anything about him. To Ike he is as much of a mystery as he is to us. I don't understand him, but I believe he is a second Ike."

"He might be trying to trick you."

"I don't think it."

"Well, I hope not."

"See what he is doing."

"By Jove, he's standing there waving a lantern for us to come."

The bandits ran forward as rapidly as they could through the rough, uneven tunnel. At the spot where the eccentric fellow was standing, they found a glove.

"See that air, mistur," chuckled Old Cottonsox. "He's right over thar."

"Who?"

"Dun know."

"One of them?"

"Reckin so."

Crack!

Sharp and keen the report rang out in the tunnel. There was a blinding flash in front and all was darkness.

In a second Jesse and Cole Younger had leveled their revolvers and fired.

The earth about them seemed to crack at the reports, and fine particles of stone and earth rolled down upon them.

Accompanying the double report came a wild yell of agony, which filled the tunnel with the most horrible echoes the ears of the banditti ever heard.

Through the smoke, lantern in hand, rushed Old Cottonsox. Down the tunnel he ran until, turning around a corner, he was lost to sight. Jesse and Cole heard another shot, and they supposed they would find Cottonsox dead.

They hurriedly groped their way along until they passed a turn in the tunnel, and saw a lantern about two hundred yards ahead.

The lantern was in the hand of Old Cottonsox, who was kneeling on the ground holding something or somebody.

"Come on, Cole, he's got him!" cried Jesse James.

They ran their best through the darkness and over the uneven ground, and came upon the eccentric old fellow holding a man's arm.

"He air dun fer. Them bullets o' yourn fotched 'im," said the eccentric individual.

"Is he dead?" asked Jesse.

"He air jist a fotchin' his last breath," said Old Cottonsox.

"Maybe he can tell us where the others have gone," said Jesse. "Perhaps he can tell us where the fifteen million is hidden."

"No, he can't speak."

"What, speechless?"

"Too fur gone."

"Let me at him," said Jesse. He bent over the dying man, shook him, and said:

"Speak, sir; can't you speak?"

Only a groan and a glare from those fast-fading eyes answered him.

"Speak, sir, or I will finish you in a hurry. Where are the others? Where are the fifteen millions?"

No answer.

"Why don't you tell me, you wretch, where the fifteen millions have been put. I'll choke out what little breath you have."

The fellow was gasping for breath, and either unconscious or speechless.

Jesse became enraged, struck him and swore he would beat him black and blue if he didn't speak.

"Hold on, Jess!" said Cole Younger, who, bandit as he was, had a heart in his breast. "Don't strike a dying man again. I am a robber by profession, a thief from circumstances, but I am not a brute, and I will not stand that."

"Well, Cole, we want the fifteen millions."

"But can't you see this man can't speak a word? He is too far gone."

"Oh, I could stamp the life out of him!"

"But you won't!"

"Won't I?"

"No."

"Why?"

Jesse was quick tempered, and he disliked to have his authority disputed at any time. He was prudent, however. Cole Younger was strong, and as brave as himself, and he was a man who was not to be trifled with, so the bandit chief decided to let him alone.

A few gasps and all was over. The wounded man was dead. That he was one of the original fifteen who first robbed the stage coach there was no doubt, for the mask and wig he had worn lay at his side, and he had a revolver in his hand, one cylinder of which was empty.

"Well, Cole, it's too bad; the key to the mystery is lost in the death of this man, and now what am I to do?"

"Hunt for another clew. See, there goes Cottonsox like a faithful hound scenting for a fresh trail."

"He is an odd fellow."

"A strange man, Jesse; but unless he is remarkably shrewd and tricking us beyond all conception, he is our friend—our best friend."

"Well, it would certainly seem so."

"I don't think there can be any doubt about it."

"Let us follow him, for he carries the lantern, and I don't like to be left alone in this underground passage."

"Nor I."

They pressed on after the strange, eccentric fellow, who, with eyes on the ground as if following a trail, continued on along the narrow passage at a rapid walk.

"See—he has stopped," said Cole.

"Yes, there's another discovery."

"Then you may look out for another fight."

It was just what Jesse thought might be anticipated.

"Cole?"

"What?"

"Do you know there is danger fighting down here?"

"Well, there is danger of fighting anywhere, my boy."

"But there is special danger in fighting here."

"Why?"

"Well, every shot fired in these underground tunnels, it seems to me, loosens a tone of dirt and stone, and who knows but that another shot may drop in the whole surface of the earth, and drop down on us and bury us forever beneath it?"

"What you say is true."

"But see there—he is moving that lantern again."

"He has made some discovery."

"What is it?"

"I don't know."

"Hello, the passage widens. He has found a real room. See, there are straight walls and a floor. It's a good wide room."

The bandits hurried into the strange subterranean chamber, in the centre of which stood the eccentric being called Cottonsox.

"Come on—come on! I've got 'em right here," he cried.

"Where?"

"Right here," and he pointed down at the trap-door beneath him.

"Who have you there?"

"Them fellers," answered Old Cottonsox.

"I guess, Cole Younger, it's all about right," said Jesse. "I guess he has really got them there."

Their eccentric guide held a lantern and a slender cord in one hand, and with the other lifted the trap, exhibiting a dark hole in the floor. Jesse and Cole came near enough to look down into the hole, and both shuddered.

It seemed as if they were gazing down into the regions of eternal darkness.

"Right down in thar—see, they're all down in thar," whispered Old Cottonsox. "Look out yer don't git too cluss, ur a bullet'll plug yer mug."

Jesse and Cole drew back, and Old Cottonsox began unwinding his cord.

"Where did you get that cord?" Jesse asked.

"Had it."

"Brought it with you?"

"Umph, humph!"

"Well, you seem remarkably well supplied with all kinds of utensils for exploring shady places."

"Umph, humph!" and Cottonsox grinned.

"What are you going to do?"

"Let ye down."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Among 'em."

"Among those ruffians?"

"Yes."

"To be torn to pieces?"

"Yes."

"Do you think I'm a fool?"

"Well, I might travel all round this ere town, an' git a dozen men to coincide with ye in that opinion."

"Well, I'm not going down there."

"Jesse, somebody must go."

"Well, I won't be first."

"Nur me," answered Old Cottonsox.

"Well, some one must be first," put in Cole.

"Let him."

"Me?" asked Cottonsox.

"Yes, you."

"Why?"

"Because, as you was first to find that dark hole, to you belongs the honor of exploring it."

"All right."

The fellow seemed utterly fearless, and fastening the rope around his arms, suffered himself to be lowered down into the dark abyss.

He took the lantern with him, and Jesse and Cole Younger watched the light as it grew dimmer and dimmer until it went out, and they were left in total darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

LOOKING AT DEATH.

"What does that mean, Cole?"

"I don't know."

"It just looks as if the light had gone out forever, leaving everything in total darkness."

"It does seem that we can never get out of here, and it's dark as Egypt."

The bandits, bold, bad, brave men as they were, were intimidated by the awful darkness and deep solemn silence which surrounded them. Their hearts seemed to stand still and the blood was frozen in their veins.

There was an awful silence. The silence of the tomb—a silence which seemed deafening to every one.

When they spoke their voices sounded so strange and ghoulish that they could hardly bear to hear them.

"Cole?"

"What?"

Both whispered.

But what awful whispers those were. The stirring of a single breath of air seemed to set in motion ten thousand demons. The whispering here and there and everywhere seemed to pierce their souls.

"Let's get out of the infernal place."

"Yes, but can we?"

"We must."

"Which way will we go?"

"The way we came."

"Which way did we come?"

"Up that passage."

"There?"

"Yes."

"That's right the opposite way."

"No, it's not."

"I tell you we came the other way."

"And I tell you you are mistaken."

"I am not."

At this moment there came a ray of light from below.

"Hello!"

"What does that mean?"

"Old Cottonsox has found a match, it seems."

"He has."

"I thought he was dead."

"No, it seems his lantern went out."

Hope once more sprang up in the breast of the bandit chief and his lieutenant.

"We'll make it yet!"

Their eccentric guide could now be seen far below them, sitting on a rock in the deep cavern-like apartment, lighting his lamp.

He had taken off the globe, lighted the wick, and replaced the globe.

The light flared up and filled the stone apartment below with floods of mellow light.

"Well, there he is."

"Yes."

"And the room below is vacant."

"Only he."

Their guide tied the lantern about his waist, and seizing the rope cord, with nimbleness one would not expect of one of his age, ran up the rope to where the bandit chief and his lieutenant stood.

It was a relief to them to have the light and even that eccentric man with them.

"What did you find down there?" Jesse asked.

"Nuthin'."

"I feared you had been killed."

"But I wasn't."

"I wonder what that underground trap was ever used for?"

"I dun know," answered the guide.

After a further search of the premises, the bandits came to the conclusion that their enemies were not in the coal shaft, and decided to go out on top of earth again.

Jesse James was first to reach the surface, and after drawing a few chests full of fresh air, he said:

"Well, I don't care for any more adventures underground."

"Did you find it?" Frank asked.

"What?"

"The fifteen millions, to be sure?"

"No."

"Why?"

"It's not there."

"Not there?"

"No."

"Then where is it?"

Jesse gave his brother a vexed glance, and said:

"If I knew I would say, but I don't know."

"Well, Jess, we must find it."

"Of course we must—if we can."

Frank's avarice allowed him to make many bold strokes. His bravery was below par, as we have seen. His courage was only a sort of reckless courage, urged on by selfishness.

"Well," said Frank, "I guess I'll go out myself and find them."

"Well, you can go," Jesse answered.

Frank James wheeled his horse about and dashed madly away into a thicket, and for half an hour rode recklessly through wood and plain; up hill and down plain, as if he was insane and furious.

But Frank's caution soon came to his relief.

He reined in Jim Malone, and was going at a more easy pace, when he suddenly came in full view of a house.

It was a two-story frame, and had a bright light in one of its lower rooms. The house seemed to have been built right in the road, and Frank was in hearing of those within the house before he saw it.

Then he drew rein and listened.

There was a jumbling of words, as if many persons, either very angry or very much excited, were talking hurriedly with each other.

"Well, what does all that mean?" Frank James asked himself.

"I guess I'll dismount and go and see."

He sprang from his saddle, tied his horse to a sapling, and with a revolver ready cocked in his hand, began creeping upon the house.

From tree to tree he slowly and carefully crept forward; he stole step by step, taking care not to rustle a leaf nor snap a twig.

The nearer he approached the house, the louder and more angry became the words within.

The gable window was toward him, and went straight to it.

The tall bushes and trees grew almost quite up to the window, forming a shadow for him to crawl through.

Frank James reached the window, and gazed through at the people within.

There was a man near forty years of age, with long dark whiskers, and a frown upon his face, standing in the centre of the floor, talking to a golden-haired girl of about eighteen.

"Alice, there is no need of this nonsense," said the man.

"Noah Cook, don't you come near me!"

"You are my wife."

"It is false."

"You are—here is the marriage certificate that makes you mine."

"That certificate is a lie on its face! Oh, let me go!"

"But the ceremony was said."

"Of which I knew nothing at the time. Oh, Noah Cook, Noah Cook, what a villain you are!"

"This to your husband? I appeal to these men," and Noah Cook waved his hand toward the ten men disguised with black masks over their faces, who sat around the room.

"They are your villains—your hirelings," cried the girl. "I cannot trust them!"

"I can."

"But, Noah Cook, you shall pay for this!"

"How?"

"With your life!"

"Ha, ha: whom have I to fear?"

"There is one whom you had better fear. He will find me. You can't hide in any place so secret that he will not find me. You can't bury me in the ground so deep that he will not dig me out."

The villain laughed a hoarse, deep laugh, and then said:

"Do you mean George Hamlin?"

"I do."

"That young upstart?"

"He is no upstart. George Hamlin is a man with a man's heart in his body, and you—you——"

"What am I?"

"A fiend!"

"Thank you for the compliment."

The scoundrel smiled quite complacently, and turned about to his masked followers and said:

"Boys, never mind this little domestic breeze, it will soon blow over."

A deep, hoarse laugh was the response, and one of the masked scoundrels answered:

"We understand it all. We gets paid for all we does, and we says nothing."

The man called Noah Cook turned to Alice and said:

"Alice, sit here by this table with me."

"No, scoundrel, I don't want to get near you."

"Then sit on the opposite side, with the table between us."

"That's as near as I ever want to sit to you!"

"Ha, ha, ha! My charmer, you don't seem to like your husband?"

"Oh, I hate you! I hate you!"

"Well, I don't care if I never see you, if you will arrange a little matter satisfactorily to me."

"What matter?" asked Alice in amazement.

"It's this."

He drew from his pocket a package of papers, which he unfolded and spread out before her.

"Now, I want you to sign this."

"What is it?"

"Can't you read?"

Frank James crept close to the window, and tried to get a glimpse of the document, or hear something that would tell him what it was; but was unable to do so.

"Sign that, Alice, and after I have gathered up to myself the fifteen millions of dollars spoken of in that paper, you are at liberty to go wherever you please."

"Sir?"

"Sign it."

"And deliver to you fifteen millions?"

"Yes."

"Never!"

"You get your liberty."

"I can die."

"You will be free to marry George Hamlin."

"Yes, and impoverish him and enrich you?"

"Yes."

"Never!"

"Think well, Alice."

"I have thought."

"You have not."

"I have."

"You shall do it!" roared the infuriated villain, starting to his feet. "I will not be balked by you! By all that's sacred and holy on the earth or in the heavens above, I will not be balked at this stage of the game!"

His eyes gleamed with a dangerous fury, and his face was one of terrible rage.

But the girl captive was calm. She folded her arms over her breast, and in a dignified, heroic manner said:

"I am not afraid to die. I defy you—do your worst!"

There was a strange silence.

Frank James was an excited auditor and spectator. He became so absorbed in the dramatic scene before him that he quite forgot himself and lost his usual caution.

He did not hear the man who was coming toward the house behind him.

The man was masked like the ten in the house.

He saw a black horse standing under a tree, to which he had been tied. The masked man paused and gazed for a moment in wonder. Then he more cautiously moved toward the house, which he was guarding.

The house was dark, and he saw a man standing by the window, gazing in on the scene.

That man was not one of his band. He knew not who he was, and determined to apprehend him. Frank James, wholly absorbed with the scene that was being enacted before him, and utterly unconscious of the approach of any one, stood gazing in at the window. Slowly and cautiously as a creeping cat draws upon an unsuspecting mouse, the dark, powerful guard approached Frank James.

A heavy fist is raised.

Whack!

The blow might have felled an ox. Frank went down, but stunned as he was, he did not wholly lose his presence of mind, and made a frantic effort to get his revolver, but ere he could do so, a second blow fell on his face, which stunned him.

"What's the matter there? What have you got there?" asked Noah Cook, as he and his companions ran out of the house to the place where Frank James was struggling to rise, to be knocked down a third time.

"I don't know who he is—an interloper, I guess. Probably a detective."

"What was he doing?" Noah Cook asked.

"Trying to peep in the window."

"He's a sneak."

"He's a spy."

"A detective."

"Hang him!"

"Hang him!"

Frank James regained consciousness with these shouts and cries ringing in his ears. He was dumb and silent—frozen with horror, and momentarily expecting to be launched into eternity.

Quite different indeed was Frank from his brother Jesse. Jesse James could face death without flinching. He defiantly faced his would-be executioners on more than one occasion, and told them to do their worst, but Frank became a cringing coward.

"We can't let him go, boys," said Noah Cook.

"No."

"He'd tell."

"I swear I won't!" Frank answered.

"Don't trust him."

"No, no; don't trust him!"

"He'll blow it everywhere!"

"Oh, spare me, spare me!" whined and sobbed Frank.

"We'll not do it!"

"Bring him in," cried Cook.

"All right; come on, sir. Come on; you'll do a hornpipe over nothin'!"

Frank James realized his terrible situation in a moment. He knew that he was soon to be hurled to certain death, and his mind reviewed in lightning flashes the incidents of his past life. He had never realized how terrible that life had been, and on his conscience and soul he felt the murder of hundreds. He seemed to hear the death shrieks again, as they rang on the streets of Lawrence, or echoed from the plains of Centralia. It was like a terrible dream.

"Bring him to that tree, and let's have it over," cried Noah Cook.

With a frantic, desperate bound Frank James broke from two strong men.

A third seized him. The bandit's long legs beat a tattoo on his back, and the villain rolled upon the ground. Others came to the masked man's aid, and Frank, after a terrible struggle, was overpowered, and bound hand and foot.

"There, curse you, I'll have you now!" roared one of the masked foes. "Your next kickin' will be at nothin'."

"Hold him," roared Noah Cook, "and I will go in the house and bring a rope to hang him with!" He ran in the house, leaving Frank facing death.

CHAPTER XII.

TROUBLE.

Noah Cook rushed into the house for the rope with the intention of hanging the spy, and on reaching the room where Alice Brooks had been left, he cried:

"Gone!"

Alice was gone.

Cook tore his hair and swore and beat the walls with his fists until his hands were bruised.

Alice Brooks was a shrewd girl, and as soon as she was left alone by the masked villains under Cook, she was not slow to take advantage of the event to escape.

Noah supposed she was strongly guarded by his council of ten, and was resting in perfect security, having no thought of any one abandoning his post.

But Cook's band were but poorly drilled or disciplined. They seemed ready to forsake the prisoner, each one supposing that some other was keeping guard, and the result was that Alice found herself unguarded.

She rushed from the door and ran into the woods. Terror and the dread horror of being recaptured by Noah Cook lent wings to her flight, and she flew away like a bird. She ran and ran and ran, taking no heed of her course, nor time, nor distance.

Her heart beat wildly, her breath came short and quick, and she felt that her limbs were quaking beneath her, and that she must soon fall; but she kept up—bravely up, and rushed madly on. But her strength was giving out.

She stumbled and fell. She got up, and learned that she had bruised her knee. Great, horrid sounds were ringing in her ears, and strange, awful sights flashed before her eyes. All was noise and fearful sights. Poor girl, she was almost ready to succumb and yield up the ghost. But she ran on. She knew not whether she was pursued or not, nor whether those noises were real or only caused by the rushing of blood to her head. She staggered as she ran, and finally she stumbled and fell, and all was oblivion.

"Wall, sis, hev yer 'bout come to?" were the first words Alice heard on regaining consciousness.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Oh, guess 'tain't nuthin' much the matter, sis. Yer jist ran till yer tuckered out, and I found yer and picked yer up."

"Who are you?"

"Old Cottonsox."

She now remembered the queer, odd name she had heard on board the stage, and recognized by the dim starlight the man as one of the passengers.

"Oh, you were on the stage to-night?"

"Yas."

"You remember I was carried off against my will?"

"Wall, I reckon I ain't likely to furgit it, sis! It made me so cuss-fired mad that I had er notion ter eat my boots."

"But—but let me see. I got away, I believe, didn't I?"

"I guess yer did, Sis."

"I ran."

"Believe yer did; yer looked like it to me."

"Oh, yes, I know now! I ran and ran and ran until I fainted."

"An' then I found yer."

"Thank you, sir, for finding me."

"Oh, no thanks, Sis; anybody else could er done it ef they had jist come this way."

"But you were searching for me."

"Reckin I war, Sis, an' ef I hadn't a-come ercross yer lyin' there, jist still like yer war dead, I'd a-been follerin' and huntin' ye yit."

That terrible night, brimful of so much misery to poor Alice Brooks, was drawing to a close. In the distance, far to the east, could be seen the light of approaching dawn.

"Do you know where we are?" asked Alice, starting to her feet and leaning against a tree.

"We're in the woods, I reckon," he answered.

"But this part of the world is inhabited."

"Some places of it air."

"How far is it to the nearest house?"

"Waal, Sis, that air not the house fur ye ter stop in. They ain't yer friends; but the nearest house yer kin stop in with any-thing like safety air erbout three miles away."

"Then let us hasten to it at once."

"Hold on, gal."

"Why?"

"Ain't yer in too big a hurry?"

"No—one can't be in too great a hurry when they are flying from such danger as menaces me."

"Waal, I reckon not, pervidin' they're able ter go, Sis."

"I am able. I am strong again."

She was so anxious to be going that she could not wait longer, and urged him until he assented, at the same time adding:

"Waal, gal, I dun know that we are doin' right. Better a-layed in them bushes er few hours an' got rested."

"Oh, no; they might come on me while I was resting."

"If they had come I would er made 'em sick."

"How?"

In answer he held up a pair of murderous-looking revolvers, and said:

"I'd er played 'em with er vengeance, yer bet."

"And you are armed?"

"Yer bet."

"Were you armed when on the stage?"

"I war."

"Why didn't you defend me then?"

"Waal, Sis, ter tell the truth, I war kinder disappointed in that fracas."

"How were you disappointed?"

"Disappointed in the men, and then disappointed in what they war goin' ter do."

"Didn't you know they would carry me off?"

"Swar, Miss, I never suspected it until they'd done it, an' it war too late then ter kick."

"Let us go to the house. Are you sure you can trust the people there?"

"Know it."

"Go."

"Foller."

"Lead the way."

They started through the woods. Old Cottonsox soon found a path worn smooth, evidently by the animals that had traveled it.

"Are you well acquainted in this country?" Alice asked.

"Not very."

"You have been here before, have you not?"

"Yes."

"Often?"

"Several times."

"Well, guide me to a place of safety, and you shall be paid for it."

"Waal, gal, I'd do it ef I didn't git a cent, but d'yer know that yer worth a heap of money?"

"Me?"

"Yes."

"No. I heard something about it, but I never suspected that I was worth anything."

"Gal, thar's fifteen millions o' dollars in you."

"Me?"

"Yer bet."

"There must be some mistake."

"No, not a bit of it. I don't know how it air anyway myself, but that feller wot had you, Noah Cook, ur wotever he is, ez good ez said as much. Air ye his wife?"

"No."

"But he claims ye air."

"He held me while somebody said the ceremony."

"I was stupefied, but I denied the marriage, and when the man, minister or whoever he was, asked if I would accept him for a husband, I said no."

"Waal, gal, I know a leetle erbout law, an' I want ter gin ye a p'inter right now, and it's this: yer not his wife."

"Thank you."

"Oh, yer welcome."

"I am not his wife—I have always known I could not be married without my consent."

"I am glad yer know it, 'cos it'll take a load off yer mind. But I say, Sis, yer may be talkin' too much."

"Oh, no. It doesn't fatigue me to talk."

"It don't?"

"No. I'm becoming rested."

"It gits lighter?"

"Yes, and will soon be day, then we can travel much faster."

On reaching the top of a hill our fugitives heard the report of a gun and the shouts of men below.

"Oh, heaven!" gasped Alice.

"Don't be skeered, gal."

"But they are after us."

"I don't know. Thar's goin' ter be trouble."

Old Cottonsox drew his formidable looking revolvers and sighted

along the barrels to assure himself they were straight. Then he looked into the chambers to see that they were loaded.

"Now, ef somebody don't look erleetle out," the old fellow said, "they'll be in condemned leetle diffikilty afore they know it. I'll jist put my fingers on these 'ere barkers an' they'll spit more fire'n a hailstorm o' brimstone at Sodom and Gomarrer."

"But avoid trouble if you can."

"I will; so come, gal, let's git in that big bunch of bushes down under the hill ez quick ez we cau."

They ran down the hillside and plunged into the thicket just as a chorus of yells came on the air behind them.

"Git, gal."

They ran to a large tree, where they halted, and Old Cottonsox, with a nimbleness which was remarkable for a man of his age, climbed up the tree, ensconcing himself in its thick branches, and gazing about over the scene.

He saw half a dozen men running toward the thicket.

Quickly descending, he said:

"Gal, I reckon we'd better be er gittin' erway. I don't think the atmosphere air very good fur my health."

Again seized by that awful dread which had almost frozen her heart, she ran with all possible speed through the brush, swishing it aside, getting her clothes torn and skin bruised. Sometimes she would be blinded by the bushes striking her in the face, and for several moments was compelled to shut her eyes, and blindly stumble and stagger forward.

The poor girl was almost in despair, for she heard the sound of voices not far in their rear.

"Keep of good sperits, gal, for I'm at hand!" cried a cheerful voice behind her.

"It's Old Cottonsox!" she cried.

"Yer bet. Big ez life."

"Heaven bless him. But what can his single arm do against so many?"

"Lots."

This seemed to add new hopes to the almost fainting girl. She was almost on the point of sinking in despair and praying to take her from this world of anxious cares, when the cheerfulness of Old Cottonsox came through his voice and encouraged her.

There was still hope.

"See them rocks ahead, gal?" cried the old man.

"Yes."

"Stop thar."

"What for?"

"Me."

"What are you going to do?"

"Make someone sick."

"Don't—don't——"

"Go on, now, an' you jist stop thar at them rocks fur me."

"I will."

Then she ran as rapidly as she could to the stones and came to a halt.

Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

Shots were ringing out on the morning air, and while it was yet dark enough to see the flash of the pistols, it was sufficiently light for her to see the smoke hanging dense and thick among the bushes and trees.

She had heard, following the shots, shouts and shrieks of agony.

"Who has been hit?" the girl asked herself. Oh, was it my pre-server? Heaven grant not."

The bullets began to whiz through the air above the head of the girl.

She sank down on her knees and prayed fervently for help.

Soon she saw her protector running toward her, half a dozen fierce armed men at his heels.

At this moment a youth, not over nineteen or twenty years of age, came running toward her.

"George, George Hamlin," she cried. George carried an empty gun in his hand, but, raising it, he struck Old Cottonsox a blow that downed him flat upon the ground.

"Oh, George, George, why did you do that?" cried the girl, running toward her lover.

"Alice! Alice! found at last!"

"Look out, George!"

"Why?"

"Oh, look!"

Her breath was almost gone, and she was too weak to finish the sentence and tell him where to look. But at this moment a man rushed on George Hamlin, struck him down, and cried:

"There! tie him and bring him along."

Then he leaped at the girl, who was powerless to move.

"Oh, my beauty, so I've got you again, have I?" he cried.

"Oh, Noah Cook, heaven grant you will spare me."

"Me spare you?"

"Yea."

"Never!"

"Oh, don't."

"Come."

"Where?"

"With me."

"Help! help!"

"You are my wife and your place is with your husband."

"Oh, spare me."

She swooned, and, raising her in his arms, he said:

"So much the better, she will not kick and yell now. Bring on the boy, but leave that other old fool."

And with the two insensible prisoners they hurried away.

A few moments later Old Cottonsox sat up, rubbed his head, yawned, got upon his feet, and went across the hill, saying:

"I guess thar's goin' ter be trouble somewhar, and jist like ez not I'll be in. I declar I do hev ther confoundest wust time o' anybody, when thar's er row in ten miles er round yer kin count me in it. I jist seem born fur scrimmages."

CHAPTER XIII.

HURLED THROUGH THE WINDOW.

We had as well state at the opening of this chapter that Frank James' life was saved by the escape of Alice Brooks. He took advantage of the confusion and excitement which prevailed immediately after her escape to dart away to the woods, mounted Jim Malone and away.

When he joined Jesse James, Cole Younger and the others, he found them greatly perplexed over the mysterious disappearance of Old Cottonsox.

After due deliberation on the subject and their present position, they decided to go a little further in the wood to where Cole knew of a cavern and remain there during the day, which was approaching.

At night they resolved to resume the search for the fifteen millions which they had lost, and never cease until they had found it.

The sun was not over two hours high when a man carrying something under his arm emerged from the woods, and ran to a house about three miles from the spot where Alice Brooks was recaptured. He did not stop at the door to knock, but pushed it open and went boldly in.

The house was a large two-story frame, built of pine boards.

In the hallway the newcomer was met by a negro boy, who turned up his eyes in amazement.

"Tell Miss Gray I want to see her," said the newcomer.

"Yes, sah."

The negro boy ran upstairs, and rapped at a door on the side of the hall. The door was opened and the darky said:

"A gemman to see Miss Gray."

"Show him up."

The negro found the stranger almost at his heels, and in two minutes from the time the stranger emerged from the wood to go to the house he was in the apartment with the young lady calling herself Miss Gray, and the negro was scratching his woolly head, as he went down the stairs, muttering:

"Dar's somethin' mighty strange erbout all ob dis wot I can't understand at all."

"Well, Carl Greene," said the woman, her beautiful eyes flashing with a deadly, dangerous fire. "what have you discovered?"

"Much."

"Where are they?"

"The James Boys?"

"Yes, or rather, Jesse James, for I have sworn never to cease neither night nor day until I have brought that villain to justice. Poor Henry, his blood cries out to me from the ground, and he must and shall be revenged."

"Have no fears, Mrs. Caloway, but that will be done."

"Oh, will it be done? Will I ever reap my reward? I have waited long," she cried, hotly, passionately, "and I want my reward. They say all things come to those who learn to wait, and I have waited, oh, how I have waited! It seems years to me since I swore to be avenged for my husband's murder."

And she went on thus sobbing and laughing so hysterically between her outbursts of rage that Carl Greene, the shrewd detective, began to fear she would lose her reason.

"Hold, Nora Caloway, hold, don't talk and act that way."

"Why?" and she laughed strangely.

"Because you have been long seeking what at this moment is almost within your grasp."

"What?"

"Revenge."

The word was sweet to her ear, and she clapped her hands in joy.

"How near is it?" she asked. "Oh, how near is it? I wish—oh, I wish that I—I had him right now by the throat, oh, wouldn't I drive my dagger through his heart."

"Don't, Nora, don't again work yourself up in such a fury. Take it cool; be calm and all will be well."

"I will, Carl. I have great confidence in your bravery, your honor and wisdom, and I shall be guided by you."

"What have you discovered?" he asked, when she was more calm.

"I saw a number of men just at sunrise going down the valley."

"Mounted or on foot?"

"Mounted."

"Did you use your field-glass?"

"I did."

"Were they armed?"

"Yes."

"Anything else peculiar about them?"

"Yes; they all wore black masks over their faces, and had two prisoners."

"Two?"

"Yes."

A troubled look came over the face of Carl Greene, the detective. He seemed annoyed at the announcement that there was more than one.

"Two prisoners," he repeated. "Are you quite sure there were two?"

"I am."

"Men?"

"No, one was little more than a boy, and the other, I should say, was a girl of eighteen."

"Well, you are quite sure they were prisoners?"

"I am."

"How are you sure?"

"They were both tied."

"I guess that is convincing."

"It was to me."

"Did you watch them long?"

"I did—they went to a big house which stands about five or six miles down the valley, and went into it. There I lost sight of them."

"Have they come out?"

"No."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Well, I have not seen them."

"But might they not have come out and you not see them?"

"Yes; but I hardly think so."

"Well that is strange."

"Do you believe they are the James Boys?"

"I don't."

She asked him his reason for so believing, but he gave only an evasive answer, and concluded with:

"Wait here, Nora. Bide your time and all will be well."

"I will."

"I must go now, and it may be some time before you see me, but believe me that wherever I go, and whatever I do, is to the accomplishment of your plans."

"I will trust you."

He was gone, and then the young widow sat by the window with her powerful glass sweeping the valley below, and the strange house, whither she had seen the armed band enter with two prisoners. Through the foliage she now caught sight of a guard about the house.

But what is that in the wood on the hill this side of the house? Through the leaves and thick bushes she occasionally catches a glimpse of a man. She now sees his face, and oh, what a strange face!

And there was the idiotic grin, which was the strangest characteristic of that eccentric individual called Old Cottonsox. His hair was gray, and his face wrinkled, yet his form was supple, and he was as muscular as an athlete.

This man was Cottonsox himself. All day long he had kept his eye on the house, and toward night crept up toward it. When he was within half a hundred paces he came to a halt, and gazed about him.

"Guess they've got a guard out thar sunnwars, an' fust thing I know, I mought git myself into trouble."

Then he waited for an hour beneath a great oak tree, then he climbed to the top and reconnoitered.

After having apparently satisfied himself as to the locality of the guards, he descended to the ground, and crept away on his hands and knees. Slowly and cautiously along the path that led through the thickets, parting the interlocked branches with his hands, so as to make no noise at all, he pressed on. It was an hour of great anxiety to the eccentric man, who seemed to be impressed that there was a line of picket guards he would have to pass through before he could reach the house.

Creeping through the bushes, or flitting about from tree to tree,

the stranger crept along until he was beneath the house. Here he paused.

Voices above could be heard talking in angry or excited tones.

The window in the second story was open, and the night being still, the scout could hear every word that was said.

The house was built on a great flat stone, and the yard beneath the window was nearly all stone—rough and uneven, so that Old Cottonsox came near stumbling several times.

"What's that they're saying?" he asked himself, as he listened.

"Alice, give me your consent," said a voice, which one who knew him would have recognized as Noah Cook.

"Say no!" put in another.

"Prisoner, be still."

"I won't."

"We will silence you."

"Oh, George—George, what must I say?" and poor Alice on her knees wrung her hands in an agony of distress.

Noah Cook and his villains were in the upper apartment with their prisoners, George Hamlin and Alice Brooks. George Hamlin was a brave, daring young fellow, with more courage and determination than most young men of his age. He had been captured, as we have seen, trying to rescue the girl he loved, and he bore his captivity with all the stoicism of an Indian brave.

"Defy them, Alice. Bid them do their worst!" cried George.

"Oh, George, I cannot."

"Sign this document," cried Noah Cook to the girl, "or, by all I hold sacred, I will slay him at your feet!"

"Don't, Alice, don't!"

"Oh, George, I must."

"Why must you?"

"To save you, George. Your life is worth more to me than twice fifteen millions of dollars."

"But hold, Alice!"

The girl stepped forward and had taken the pen in her hand, when George again arrested her attention.

"Silence, curse you, or I will cut your tongue out!" hissed Noah Cook.

"I won't keep silent if you cut my heart out," cried George. "I will warn that girl against what she is about to do."

With the pen in her hand the girl paused and looked about her, hesitating.

"Sign it!" cried Noah, pointing to the document on the table.

"Don't do it!"

"Silence, fool!"

"I would be a fool to keep silent."

"Remove him to another apartment. Take him away and she will sign it," cried one of Noah Cook's followers.

"That's the go."

"Seize him and away with him!"

"Hold!"

It was the girl who spoke, and as she did so she flung the pen upon the table and struck a dramatic attitude. So sharp and so imperative was her command that all paused for a moment to gaze at her.

"What do you mean?" demanded Noah Cook.

"Remove him and I swear you can fling me from that window upon the rugged rocks below, before I will subscribe my name to that paper."

"Well, sign it then, and he may stay."

"No; hold, don't——" began George, but two or three seized him, and one fellow clapped his hand over his mouth.

"No. Take your hand from his mouth and let me hear his objection."

"Sign, girl, sign."

"I will not."

"You shall."

"Never, though you rend me to pieces, never will I sign until I hear what objection he has to my writing my name upon that paper."

"Take your hands off his mouth," said Noah Cook, "and let him speak."

The hand was removed from his mouth, and then the chief instigator of the nefarious plot said:

"Now, sir, speak."

"Yes, George, give me your objections," pleaded the girl. "If they be only to save the paltry sum of fifteen millions of dollars I will not consider them for a moment. We can live happily on a crust of bread and a glass of water in a hovel. Let them have the money, George, all we want is each other, and our liberty."

He could not speak for several moments, for they had almost suffocated him with their hands over his mouth and nose.

"Don't sign it, Alice, don't sign it," he cried as soon as he could.

"Why, George?"

"The moment you do, you sign my death warrant."

"He lies!" roared Cook.

"Ah, Noah Cook, you infamous villain, don't flatter yourself you are deceiving me. I know you too well. You know you would

never be safe while I was alive. Nothing is more foreign to your intentions at this very moment than the idea of giving Alice Brooks her liberty. You know enough of law to know that a contract obtained by force cannot stand for a moment, and that you would never be safe in the possession of the vast fortune you contemplate stealing while either of us is at large."

"He lies—he lies!"

"No, I speak the truth, the whole truth."

"No, he lies."

"She will believe me."

"Hush, not another word."

"No, let him speak," commanded the heroic maiden. "Let him speak, or I swear I will not sign the paper."

"Go on, say your worst, and be done with it," thundered Cook, who was growing desperate.

"Alice, these men intend to kill me. My life has been prolonged because Cook hopes, by preserving it, to hold me as a threat over your head, and force you to do his bidding. But don't, I pray you, don't allow him to deceive you. The moment he has accomplished his design, which is signing over all your property to him, then he will have no further use for me, and, as I am dangerous, I will be killed. Don't you believe me, Alice?"

"I do."

"Will you sign it?"

"Never."

Then Cook's face grew black with rage. He saw what a mistake had been made, and he cried:

"Sign it! By heaven, sign it, or we will hurl him from the window to the rocks below. A body found there, a man fell and killed himself, would be the coroner's verdict."

"Don't, Alice, don't."

"Sign it! I swear it."

"Leave the room. Don't believe him."

With a bitter wail the girl rushed from the room. For a moment the villains, disappointed and chagrined, were speechless. Their faces were black with rage and their eyes turned greedily toward the unfortunate captive, who stood calm and unmoved in their midst. The youth was doomed, but each was parleying in his own mind just how it should be done.

"Hurl him from the window," cried Noah Cook, "and the fall will break his neck."

Then half a dozen men seized George Hamlin and rushed to the window with him.

He was lifted up and hurled through the window into the darkness below—a fall and a groan followed.

CHAPTER XIV.

A STRIKE.

That eccentric individual who called himself by the name of Old Cottonsox was standing directly under the window when the body of the young fellow was hurled from it. He braced himself to sustain the shock, and caught George in his arms, thus saving his life.

George struck him so heavily that, strong as he was, he was staggered and came near falling. But as soon as he could recover himself he bore the insensible George Hamlin away from the spot.

George had fainted. The ordeal of falling is something but few people can endure, and George was not strong enough for it.

When he recovered he found something cool and damp on his face. Where was he, and what was that falling on him? It was water, and a few moments later, when he had more fully recovered, he made it out to be water dripping from a man's fingers.

"Well, now, youngster, bean't yer a'most all right?" asked a voice in his ear.

"Yes. What is it?"

"Oh, ye'll come to soon."

"Is that water?"

"Yes."

"Where am I?"

"Right in the woods."

"Where is she—where is Alice?"

"Oh, well, I can't eggsackly say just now, but lem me tell you, boy, it air all a-comin' out right in the end."

"I'm glad to be alive. But didn't I fall on the rocks?"

"No."

"What—wasn't I hurled from the window?"

"Yes."

"And why wasn't I dashed to pieces on the rocks below?"

"Bekase I cotched yer."

"Oh, it was you who saved my life."

"Waal, sir, I don't brag much erbout what I kin do, but I reckon that it war me who did it."

"Then, sir, to you I owe my life."

"Oh, now, don't mention it, 'kase it's not much."

"Well, it's the only life I've got, and it's worth considerable to me," said George, in a sort of desperate humor.

"Waal, youngster, wot yer goin' ter do?"

"Rescue the captive."

"Waal, I kinder expected somethin' o' the kind."

"How far are we from the house?"

"'Bout two miles."

"So far?"

"Yes."

"How did I get here?"

"I carried you on my back."

"You did?"

"Yes."

"But you are old and feeble."

"Waal, now, mebbe I ain't so blamed old an' feeble ez I seem, yer see. I am quite spry yit sometimes when I've er mind ter be."

"Well, let us hasten back and rescue her. We are both strong and daring, and there are not over eight or ten of them. There is no knowing what two bold, determined men may do when they try."

"Hold on, chap, yer got no shootin' irons, hev yer?"

"No."

"Waal, yer ain't sich an all-fired fool as ter want ter rush right inter a scrimmage without any shootin' irons, be yer?"

"I had not thought of that."

"Waal, youngster, thar air times when it air a sin not ter think, and this air one on 'em. Keep yer eyes open and yer ears open and be er thinkin' o' what yer about."

"Have you arms?"

"Yes, a few, an' I guess I kin let yer hev a pair o' barkers."

In dress and appearance Old Cottonsox was the most harmless individual imaginable. He looked as if he had never harmed anybody, and would be the last person in the world one would suspect of carrying firearms. But when called on for weapons he placed his hands beneath his seedy coat, and pulled out two large six-shooters of the latest improved pattern.

"Thar, I reckon yer kin make use o' them," he said, with a chuckle.

"Have you others?"

"A few," and he pulled out two more of the same size, two more smaller weapons from his hips, and his belt about his waist bristled with revolvers.

"Why, you are a walking arsenal," said the youth.

"Yes, I kinder reckon I am."

"Let us go—I know we will succeed, although they are five to one."

"He, he, he! Yer right, lad. Wull, come on, I reckon I am ready, so jist come on."

They arose to their feet, and though George felt weak and his knees trembled, he made no complaint.

They went through the wood as rapidly as they could, and finally came to the house.

"Why, it looks dark and deserted," said the lad.

"Yes, yer right, boy. But the rats may be asleep. Let's go kinder keerful like or we may be ther rats cotched in er trap."

They cautiously approached the house, and found it dark and silent. Not a single guard was found, and the doors were closed and locked. Old Cottonsox had a rope and hook which he flung up to the window above. The hook had a clamp upon it so neatly arranged that where it caught it held fast, and the hook imbedded in the wood so that the entire sill would have to be torn out before the hook could have been loosened.

The old man seized the end of the cord which hung to the ground, climbed noiselessly up into the window and disappeared. The lad with loudly beating heart awaited him. Then he heard footsteps within, and a few minutes later a door opened and Old Cottonsox appeared.

"Are they there?" asked George.

"No."

"Gone?"

"Gone, hide an' hair."

"Oh, where are they gone—where are they gone?" the youth wildly cried.

"Why, bless my soul, feller, I swan I dun know."

"Let's go and hunt for them."

"Waal, that air remark is sensible, and I second the motion."

He came from the house, and they set out through forest and darkness, neither of them having the least idea whether they were on the right course or not.

But they followed the valley down until they came upon the coal mines. The little village of huts about the mines were all alive with people. Torches were burning, and men and women hurrying about in the wildest excitement.

"It's a strike," said George.

"Strike?"

"Yes."

"Yes, an' it looks a leetle mite ez if some un hed been knocked down."

"There is a great excitement, and the strikers seem angry."

"Air ye acquainted in these 'ere mines?"

"Yes."

"Who's ther boss?"

"Noah Cook."

"Waal, I'll bet it's his deviltry."

"It's his oppression. I know the villain, and know that he is the author of all the trouble here."

"Do you think he air in that 'ere crowd?"

"Wait a moment, and I will listen to see."

They drew a little nearer, where from behind a great old oak tree they could hear the voice of a man haranguing the crowd.

"Go back to your work, and your wages will be paid, but every dog who does not go back will rue it. Not a morsel of bread shall be given him, his wife or starving brats, though they died of hunger."

A wild, angry roar answered this, and the voice of the foreman of the mines was drowned by the angry strikers. It was some moments before quiet could be restored, and then a voice, evidently one of the strikers, could be heard saying:

"Noah Cook, your tyranny has driven us to this. You have driven us to desperation. For the last week you have been robbing us of the money sent to pay us, and with that money have had fifteen masked villains riding about the country for some object. Heaven alone knows what."

"That's a lie!" roared Cook.

A wild roar, and then someone said:

"No, it's true."

"It's a lie!"

"It is true, Noah Cook, for I know you have been seen with that masked band."

"When?"

"Last night."

"Who says that lies?"

"I say it."

"Then you lie."

Again there was a wild roar, and high above all, the voice of the foreman could be heard, shouting:

"Stand back!"

"Kill him!"

"Keep off, or I will fire!"

"He is the cause of all our misery!"

"He starves our children!"

"He steals our money!"

"Hang him!"

"Mob him!"

"Tar and feather him!"

Amid the wild uproar, the voice of Noah Cook, wonderfully calm, could be heard, saying:

"The man who makes a move toward me will die!"

"Things are growin' purty brisk," said Old Cottonsox. "Let's git out thar and see how it'll end."

CHAPTER XV.

TWELVE THOUSAND.

As George Hamlin and his singular companion ran down into the village of strikers, they heard several pistol shots on the air, and a moment later they were among the angry strikers.

"Where is he?"

"Gone."

"Where?"

"Slunk away like the coward he is."

"Oh, had I got hold of him," cried one strong, bold miner, "I'd a tore him limb from limb."

All was the utmost confusion.

A woman was sobbing and wringing her hands over a man who had been struck down, and was just gasping his last breath for life, and two men were carrying a wounded boy in one of the huts.

A feeling of awe and stupefaction seemed to have come over everybody, and people stood about in silent trembling groups.

"He'll pay for this," cried an old man, the father of the boy who had been wounded and carried into the house to die. "He'll pay fur it, now, he'll see he'll pay fur it."

There was no effort made on the part of anyone to pay the debt. But everybody stood as if paralyzed with fear and horror.

"He'll pay fur it," shrieked the angry and horrified father, as the shrieks of his wife reached his ears. "Never mind, he'll pay for it."

But he had not the faintest idea in the world how he was to pay for it. The horrified parent had lost his wits, and with wide-

open, glaring, glassy eyes, hard and dry, he rushed about among his fellow miners shrieking those painful, revengeful words:

"He'll pay fur it."

"Who did ther shootin', boy?" asked Old Cottonsox of one of the boys who stood near.

"Ther boss."

"Wot's his name?"

"Noah Cook."

"Where is he gone?"

"I dun know."

"Didn't you see which way he went? Did you, Lem?" he asked of a boy who was passing near.

"What?"

"Did yer see which way the boss went?"

"No, but I believe he went down ther holler."

"Waal, say, boy, kin yer tell me where I'll find him?" asked the eccentric old man.

"No."

"Don't no one know?"

"Maybe Loss Sampson knows."

"Who may he be?"

"Thar he is."

A heavy set man, whose hair was growing slightly gray, at this moment came along, and Old Cottonsox hailed him.

"Wot yer want?" asked Loss.

"Dun yer be too abrupt. Ain't I yer friend?"

"I dun know."

"Which way did that air white-haired boss o' yourn go? I jist want ter git at him. Cuss fire him, anyway."

"Waal, when he'd done shootin', w'y, he ran erway down in them air woods."

"Come, let's go and find him," cried Old Cottonsox.

He ran down in the direction indicated, followed by the heedless, reckless youth, stopping for no obstacles.

George Hamlin, in his mad, eager haste, stumbled and fell to the ground. Old Cottonsox did not stop to see how badly he was injured, but continued his mad flight onward as rapidly as he could go.

Suddenly he was startled by sharp reports, like whip cracks.

He knew what that meant.

He sped away like the wind, and in a few moments saw Jesse James and Frank in pursuit of Noah Cook. Jesse and Frank were mounted, but their horses were of little advantage to them, for the ground was stony and uneven.

Noah was several hundred rods ahead of them, and running across the creek by aid of the stepping stones, he disappeared in a ravine.

"Down him, Jess!" cried Frank.

Crack!

"Did you hit him?"

"No, he's too far."

Bang! came a shot from the ravine, and the ball whizzed close to Jesse's face.

The bandit brothers drew rein to deliberate.

At this moment they heard footsteps, and Old Cottonsox burst into view.

"Hello!" he cried.

"Hello! where have you been?" asked Jesse.

"Did yer see my fox go by?"

"Yes."

"Been chasin' him."

"Has he the fifteen millions?"

"Yes."

"Then, Frank, we must have him."

"He air goin' right to it."

"Let us follow him."

They crossed the stream, and ran as rapidly as they could up among the hills.

"Whar air them other fellers?" asked Old Cottonsox, when they had reached a dense part of the wood and come to a halt for consultation.

"We don't know—we are scattered," Frank answered.

Believing their guide was a half idiotic fellow whom they could use to advantage, Jesse and Frank determined to do so, and if the fifteen millions could be obtained they would knock him on the head.

Jesse and Frank still believed that the sum of fifteen millions was in hard cash—gold and paper money—and had no idea that the stage had been robbed of a girl who had not fifteen dollars on her person. Alice Brooks represented the fifteen millions, and the only way to get it was to do so as her husband.

The trio passed on expecting every moment to be greeted by a shot.

At last Old Cottonsox came to a halt. He waved his hand to the James Boys, who followed him, to halt.

It was now past midnight, but the moon rising above the wild,

desolate place flooded the forest's blasted pines and rugged peaks with a silver light.

The James boys were so firmly convinced of the friendship and fidelity of their eccentric guide that he was permitted to go on as their spy, and they waited by the heads of their horses, holding them by the bits.

Above the sloping gray rock appeared the head of Old Cottonsox, as he paused and waved his hand for them to come on. This done, he wheeled about and started down the hill.

They followed him, and at the foot of the hill found a house. It was a small stone house, which seemed to have grown dark with age. There was an acre or so of ground cleared off about the house, but all else around it was a terrible forest.

They crept cautiously to the house and around it to the kitchen entrance, where there was a sort of park.

Their guide went to a door, which he cautiously opened, and entered a sled-room. Only one door between them and the room in which the light was seen.

They crept back out of sight of the door, just as it swung open, and someone looking out, said:

"I don't see anyone."

"Well, I heard the floor of the sled-room creak like somebody was walkin' on it."

"Don't see anybody."

"Come in, then."

The door closed, and the trio crept close to it to listen.

"Now, boys, will twelve thousand do ye?" said a voice, which they recognized as Cook's.

"It's awful little."

"Little!"

"Yes, seein' 's you git fifteen millions."

"I can't afford any more."

"But, sir, I don't see how we kin take it."

"Twelve thousand each, I mean. Will you take it?"

Then came a silence.

CHAPTER XVI.

ONE TO TWO.

Jesse and Frank James listened with eager, palpitating hearts to the conversation given in our last chapter, and misconstrued it into meaning that they had fifteen millions already on hand right in their possession.

It was so dark in the sled-room that the James Boys could not see, and though Jesse nearly always carried a dark lantern about with him, he failed to have it on this occasion. Even if he had had it he could not have used it.

He groped about with his hands until he touched the face of Old Cottonsox.

"Cottonsox, we are going to do a desperate thing."

"What air it?"

"We are going to charge right in there among those rascals and capture them, and take from them the fifteen millions which was stolen from the stage."

"Umph, humph."

"Will you help us?"

"Through thick and thin."

At this moment the voice of Noah Cook could be heard inside the room saying:

"I am willing to give you twelve thousand apiece. What do you say?"

Again the voice which had spoken before spoke up:

"Well, boys, ef we haf to we haf to."

"How could you have made twelve thousand dollars so easily?" asked Cook.

"Well, we couldn't er had a dirtier job, nuther."

"You have run no great danger."

"Wur them fellers ghosts?"

"Who?"

"The James Boys."

Frank and Jesse James both started violently at this announcement.

It was the first time that they had suspected that their identity had been discovered.

"Ther James Boys!" cried one of the confederates of Noah Cook. "What are them fellers a-follerin' us up for?"

"For boodle."

"The same as we."

"Yes."

"Why not pay 'em off."

"No, never, we'll fight 'em off."

Bang! went a foot against the door, sending it wide open, and, quick as a flash, Jesse James, followed by Frank and Old Cottonsox, leaped into the apartment, which was lighted by a solitary candle placed on a plain table.

There stood Noah Cook, with half a dozen great, strapping

fellows about him, while in a far corner of the room sat on a chair the unfortunate Alice Brooks.

"Fight it out, will you?" thundered Jesse James. "Do you wish to fight it out?"

As Jesse spoke he flourished a brace of polished revolvers in the air.

Cook's followers were all overawed and cowed by the hostile appearance of three such terrible men as those who had so suddenly, forcibly and mysteriously burst upon them.

But the arch villain was equal to the emergency, and quietly folding his arms he menaced the intruders with a look, and said:

"Just take it cool, gentlemen."

"Oh, we are three twin icebergs," said Jesse.

"I haven't the honor of an introduction, but I believe you are Colonel Jesse W. James."

"At your service," said Jesse, with mock politeness.

"Well, sir, I am Captain Noah Brooks, the chief of the coal gang."

"I have heard of you."

"I suppose so."

"Well, Jesse James, you have the reputation of being shrewd."

"I flatter myself I am."

"You are not."

"Oh, don't discourage me, please. I have been shrewd enough to evade the officers and take from you your fifteen millions which you stole from the stage coach."

At mention of the great haul from the stage coach robbery Noah Cook laughed outright.

"Well, you have been duped, indeed."

Pointing to Alice, he added:

"There is the fifteen millions—that girl sitting in the corner is heiress to fifteen millions. She married me, but is trying to desert me and rob me of the money."

"We were never married," cried Alice. "It is false."

"Ye bet it's false!" put in Old Cottonsox.

"Haven't you got the money?" asked Jesse.

"No; not a thousand dollars, all told."

"Why, we thought you had fifteen millions. We were told you did."

"Who told you?"

"He."

He pointed to Cottonsox.

Cook threw himself in a chair and laughed long and heartily. After a few moments he recovered himself, and turning to Jesse, said:

"Why, Jesse James, you're an idiot."

"What?"

"A fool."

"Dare call me that."

Click, click, and the murderous revolver of the bandit was aimed at Cook's breast.

"Hold on, Jesse, take it cool now, and learn who your friends are. You have been tricked."

"Tricked?"

"Yes, cleverly tricked."

"How?"

"You have been made a catspaw to take somebody's chestnuts out of the fire."

"What do you mean?"

That young lady can well afford to pay a detective liberally to rescue her. One of Pinkerton's detectives came to Missouri to hunt for the James Boys, and finds there is a richer reward in hunting for Alice Brooks. So he gets Jesse and Frank to help him, and after he has caught us he will then turn his attention to capturing them."

"What do you mean?" asked Jesse.

"That feller," pointing to Old Cottonsox, "is Carl Greene in disguise."

"What?"

"Oh, wot a gawl durned lie," said Old Cottonsox.

"Take off his wig, and see."

Jesse took a step toward Cottonsox, when that individual sprang behind the table, and cried:

"Hold! Surrender!"

"Have it out among yourselves. Ha, ha, ha!" roared Noah Cook, and he seized the shrieking Alice in his arms and ran from the room.

"It's Carl Greene, Pinkerton's detective," roared Jesse James. "The James Boys have been tricked," and then the three men began blazing at each other over tables and chairs.

"Surrender! Surrender!" cried Carl Greene, for the pretended Old Cottonsox was none other than Pinkerton's shrewdest and bravest detective, one who had never yet been outgeneraled.

"Never!" cried Jesse.

And then Jesse and Frank blazed away, and Carl Greene returned shot for shot.

In the general melee the candle was knocked from the table.

extinguished, and the room was enveloped in almost utter darkness.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE END DRAWS NEAR.

The shooting ended as soon as the candle was extinguished. Carl Greene lay on the floor with an empty pistol in each hand, and listened for some sound of Jesse or Frank.

Had they not been so close to each other, there is no doubt but some one of the three, and perhaps all of them, would have been killed.

But they were too close to make their aim sure, and the excitement and unexpected fight had unnerved them.

"Well, this is a scrape," said Carl Greene. "How am I to get out of this?"

He sprung the cylinder of his revolver to get out the cartridges. Bang!

Crack! came a bullet through the back of the chair.

He rolled over as two more bullets whizzed over the spot where he had laid but a moment before.

He continued rolling.

Over and over he turned not knowing whither he was going, and finally reached the door.

With a backward somersault he threw himself from the house into the yard.

"Frank?"

"Jesse?"

"There he goes."

"Shoot him!"

"After him!"

A couple of bullets whistled through the air, passing within an inch or two of the head of the detective.

Carl Greene was not one to let his enemies have it all their own way, and, loading as he ran, he wheeled about and fired.

Voices of others could be heard near, among them Noah Cook.

"Ha! Jesse James," Cook cried, "did you get your man?"

"No!" thundered Jesse.

"Was I right?"

"Yes."

"Don't meddle with my private family affairs, Jesse, and I won't meddle with yours."

"Come, help me get him," cried Jesse James, eagerly. "I would give half my life to get that fellow in my power."

"Will you make a bargain?"

"Yes."

"I have found him an annoyance to me, and if you will not interfere in my business I won't in yours."

"All right."

Noah Cook sounded a whistle.

Carl Greene heard it, and taking refuge in the thick, bushy top of an oak tree waited for them to search the grounds before he descended from his perch to make his way back to the mining camp for help.

He was about half way back when he heard footsteps, and realized that someone was coming toward him.

"It's more than one," he said. "There are two."

The detective put his ear against the ground. The approaching parties were now so near that he could hear them talking.

"What became of him?"

"I don't know."

"Who was he?"

"He called himself Old Cottonsox, and seemed like a man half crazy, but there was method in his madness."

"It is young George Hamlin, the very fellow I want, but who is that with him?" the detective said to himself.

Carl Greene crept forward a few paces, and then bolted behind a large stump to reconnoitre. He waited until George Hamlin and his companion, who, seemed only a boy, came up to him.

"It is Mrs. Nora Caloway," said the detective, who now recognized her.

He stepped out from behind the tree, and cried:

"Wait a moment."

"What, Carl Greene?" cried Nora.

"Yes."

"Who are you?" asked George Hamlin.

"I am the feller yer knowed ez Old Cottonsox," returned Carl Greene, assuming his strange western vernacular.

When he had convinced George that he was the same person who had saved his life and befriended him, that individual asked:

"Where is she?"

"I left her at a house not far away."

"Is she still in his power?"

"Yes."

"Oh, let us haste and liberate her. Can't we liberate her?"

"We can try. She has desperate men to guard her, and we may expect desperate work."

"We are desperate. Oh, I want to meet him face to face."

"He has half a dozen followers."

"Is he Jesse?" asked Nora.

"No."

"Is Jesse with him?"

"Yes."

"Then let me at him. Oh, I want to die for his sake. Henry, Henry, you shall be avenged."

"Wait; if you accompany us you must give me a promise."

"What is it?"

"To be prudent."

"I'll give it."

"You must obey me."

"I will."

"In every particular."

"You can trust me implicitly."

"Yes, in everything."

"Then remember whatever may come I am to be obeyed."

"Oh, yes, I will remember. All I want is to be avenged. Show Jesse James to me and let me strike him to the heart, and then I am perfectly willing to die."

"There is a time to strike, remember. If you strike at the wrong time you will fail, and if you strike at the right time your efforts will be crowned with success!"

"I will do anything, bear anything, endure anything, so that I may have my revenge."

There was a wild, fierce glitter in her eyes, and she looked as if she was on the very verge of insanity.

Carl Greene, growing uneasy for her, said:

"You must calm yourself, Nora, or you will be unstrung when the time comes to avenge your husband."

"Nora—avenge husband—what do you mean?" cried George Hamlin.

"Don't you know who she is?" asked Carl.

"She! Is it a she?"

"Yes."

"Why, you amaze me!"

"This person is Mrs. Nora Caloway, whose husband was killed by Jesse James. Henry Caloway was a brakeman on the train Jesse James robbed, and because this lady's husband defended an old, unprotected man, he shot him down."

"And why is she dressed out in boy's togs, going about deceiving people?"

"She is going to avenge her husband."

"Well, how?"

"She has assumed all sorts of disguises and costumes, and will run Jesse down and stab him when she finds him."

"By Jove, I believe she's got the grit to do it."

Grit is not always as important as discretion."

Then they listened a moment, and Carl Greene, who was as cautious as he was brave, said:

"We are but three, and one of us is a woman. There are nine or ten of those villains, and it is a serious question with me if we will make the attack or send for reinforcements."

"Make the attack," said George Hamlin. "Why should you longer delay? Make it at once."

"Yes, don't delay."

"We are but three."

"But a surprise—a dash—a wild charge will sweep everything before it."

Carl Greene, looking first at one and then at the other, and shaking his head, muttered:

"Young blood is hot, young spirits bold, and it is not cool judgment and reason which governs. But I am forced to yield to you, and I adopt your plans. For once we will become rash and lead the wild charge against such awful odds."

"Greater odds have been successfully fought," said George Hamlin.

"But not with such men as the James Boys and Noah Cook. Each is in himself a host."

"Our taking them by surprise will be greatly to our advantage."

"We know it."

"Let us go and bring this to an end," cried the impatient Nora.

They started back down the path, each holding a deadly weapon. With only one object uppermost, as nine, and that object the girl whom he was determined to rescue or die, the youth George Hamlin said:

"Mr. Greene, let there be no mistake."

"There will be none if we can help it," said Carl Greene.

"But bear in mind that Miss Alice Brooks is in the house, and we might hit her by accident. Beware of stray bullets."

"We will."

"For heaven's sake, don't harm her."

"I won't."

"And leave Noah Cook to me?"

"I will."

"And Jesse James to me?" put in Nora.

"I can't promise that, Nora. The first one who draws a bead on Jesse James, in my opinion, had better down him."

"Let me be the first."

As she spoke she held up her keen-bladed dagger.

"I don't know much about firing pistols, but I do know how to send a dagger to the heart of the scoundrel, and do let me have that glorious privilege."

Carl Greene cautioned all once more to be cautious.

He felt the end was approaching, and if they could only reach the house before the captive girl was taken away they would surely be able to rescue her. They hastened along the wooded path, and soon came in full view of the house.

"There it is," said Carl.

"Where?"

"The house—there, right straight ahead."

"Are they there yet?" asked the youth.

"The lights are burning."

"And Alice?"

"I can't say to a certainty, but the chances are you will find her there."

"Oh, heaven grant it," groaned the desperate lad. "I would give my life to free her."

"The chances for doing so are good, for the odds are greatly against us."

"Do you think Jesse is there?" asked Nora.

"Probably."

"Oh, I hope——"

"Whist!" interrupted Carl Greene. "Now not a word from either one of you."

Slowly and cautiously as cats creeping on their prey crept the three shadows, now flitting from tree to stone, now halting here to listen, then crawling along the ground like serpents.

"Be cautious," whispered Carl, so faintly that they could scarce hear him.

"We will."

Voices could be heard within the house, and Carl Greene called a halt when they came to a low stone wall about ten paces from it.

"Wait here until you see me wave my hand, and then follow me."

They assented.

He slowly and cautiously crept toward the house, keeping his eyes on the door and his ears drinking in every sound that issued forth.

At last he reached the door, and there he paused and listened. The detective was now so near that he could hear every word said by those within.

"We have no time to linger, Jesse James," said one whose voice he recognized as Noah Cook. "No, we have not a single moment to spare. Let us up and away, but first let us have an understanding."

"I am agreed to it," Jesse answered.

"Are you willing to stand by me?"

"Through thick and thin."

"I have roused the coal strikers, and they may join the officers who set out to find us. I don't know but that we may have to cut our way out, but if you will stand by me I will give you and Frank twelve thousand dollars each as soon as I have got my wife's handsome dower of fifteen millions."

"And help us kill Carl Greene?"

"Yes."

"Well, I will do my share."

"You know, Frank," explained Noah Cook, "I have not been long enough in the business to understand exactly how to go about killing women yet."

Then they all laughed—a cruel, reckless laugh—and Carl Greene grated his teeth in his rage, clutched his pistol, and murmured:

"The end draws near. Villains, you little dream how near you are to your end."

Turning about he waved his hand to his companions, and they came toward him.

"Take your stations," Carl whispered. "Business operations will commence soon."

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION.

George Hamlin took his position at a window on the right. The window curtains were pulled a little aside so he could see within. Carl Greene remained at the door, and at his side, on his left, her dagger clutched in her hand, stood Mrs. Nora Caloway.

Nora's face was deathly white, and her eyes were blazing with the fury of a demon.

Carl Greene, as usual, was cool and brave. Muscles of steel could not have been more firm than his at that moment. He held a revolver in each hand, and had his ear close against the door, trying

to get the direction of the parties within from the sounds of their voices.

"Well, Noah, are you ready to travel?"

"I am if I can get my wife to come. Come along, Alice, you are mine."

"It's false!" she cried; "we were never married. The man who performed the ceremony had no authority, and I never gave my consent."

"All right; we'll be married over!"

"We won't."

"We will. See here, no kicking out of the harness, or by——"

Crack! Sharp and keen rang out the report of a pistol.

Carl Greene had expected it. The echoes of the report had not ceased to reverberate ere they heard the heavy fall of a body. George Hamlin had shot through the window and killed his opponent.

Crash!

Crash!

Carl Greene struck two heavy blows on the door, and George Hamlin shouted:

"Down with the door and I will give it to them from the window."

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Every bullet hit, and Noah Cook was dead and three men wounded. The others took the alarm and made a dash out the rear door.

"What will we do with the girl?" cried Jesse James.

"Kill her!" screamed Frank.

The bandit raised his pistol, when George Hamlin fired through the window, and his bullet cut off the lock of the pistol of the outlaw, and so benumbed his hand that he could hardly hold the stock.

Carl Greene was still pounding away at the door.

"This way, Alice!" roared George.

She recognized his voice and ran to him.

George tried to raise the window and assist her out, but it was nailed down, and absolutely refused to move in any direction.

In the meanwhile Jesse and Frank were firing through the door and Carl Greene returning the shots.

"Fly, Jess!" cried Frank. "The back door is still open, and there may be a hundred out there."

Frank James ran out at the back door.

"Now for my vengeance!" cried Nora.

She knew full well now just how Jesse James would make his escape.

Quick as thought the daring girl ran around to the rear of the house, just as Jesse sprang out at the rear door.

Frank James was already some paces ahead, running at full speed toward their horses.

She leaped at Jesse James, crying as she did so:

"Die, villain! Murderer of all my earthly happiness, go to your reward!"

She stuck her dagger into his breast, and with a groan Jesse reeled. He struck her and she fell. Then he ran a few paces and Frank seized him, helped him on his horse, and they galloped away.

We have little more to tell. Cook was quite dead, and Alice Brooks unharmed, though faint and weak. She and George Hamlin were married in three days after her rescue, and on coming into possession of her vast fortune settled fifty thousand dollars on Carl Greene, the detective.

Nora was ill for a long time from overtaxing her nerves. When she learned that Jesse James was not killed, though desperately wounded by her dagger thrust, she resolved to hound him to his death.

Carl Greene had cleverly tricked the James Boys, though he had not captured them, and he resolved, as did Nora Caloway, never to cease in his endeavors until every Missouri outlaw was brought to justice. We may hear from him again, as well as from the James Boys, whom he tricked.

THE END.

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